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THE MARRIAGE OF WILLIAM ASHE

MRS. HUMPHRY WARD

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FROM THE BOOKS
IN THE HOMESTEAD OF
Sarah Orne Jewett
AT SOUTH BERWICK, MAINE

BEQUEATHED BY
Theodore Jewett Eastman
A.B. 1901 - M.D. 1905
1931

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"'I WONDER IF HE'LL COME?'"

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A N
MRS. HUM RD
WITH ILL ONS
BY ALBE NER

IN T

NEW YORK VDON
HARPER THERS
PUBLISHERS * * MCMV

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THE MARRIAGE OF WILLIAM ASHE

A NOVEL BY
MRS. HUMPHRY WARD
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY ALBERT STERNER

IN TWO VOLUMES
VOL. II

NEW YORK AND LONDON
HARPER & BROTHERS
PUBLISHERS * * MCMV

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1931

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PART III

DEVELOPMENT

"Es bildet ein Talent sich in der Stille,
Sich ein Character in dem Strom der Welt."

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XIV

"WHAT does Lady Kitty do with herself here?" said Darrell, looking round him. He had just arrived from town on a visit to the Ashes, to find the Haggart house and garden completely deserted, save for Mrs. Alcot, who was lounging in solitude, with a cigarette and a novel, on the wide lawn which surrounded the house on three sides.

As he spoke he lifted a chair and placed it beside her, under one of the cedars which made deep shade upon the grass.

"She plays at Lady Bountiful," said Mrs. Alcot. "She doesn't do it well, but—"

"—The wonder is, in Johnsonian phrase, that she should do it at all. Anything else?"

"I understand—she is writing a book—a novel."

Darrell threw back his head and laughed long and silently.

"Il ne manquait que cela," he said—"that Lady Kitty should take to literature!"

Mrs. Alcot looked at him rather sharply.

"Why not? We frivolous people are a good deal cleverer than you think."

The languid arrogance of the lady's manner was not at all unbecoming. Darrell made an inclination.

"No need to remind me, madam!" A recent exhibi-

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tion at an artistic club of Mrs. Alcot's sketches had made a considerable mark. "Very soon you will leave us poor professionals no room to live.'

The slight disrespect of his smile annoyed his companion, but the day was hot and she had no repartee ready. She only murmured as she threw away her cigarette:

"Kitty is much disappointed in the village."

"They are greater brutes than she thought?"

"Quite the contrary. There are no poachers—and no murders. The girls prefer to be married, and the Tranmores give so much away that no one has the smallest excuse for starvation. Kitty gets nothing out of them whatever."

"In the way of literary material?"

Mrs. Alcot nodded.

"Last week she was so discouraged that she was inclined to give up fiction and take to journalism."

"Heavens! Political?"

"Oh, *la haute politique*, of course."

"H'm. The wives of cabinet ministers have often inspired articles. I don't remember an instance of their writing them."

"Well, Kitty is inclined to try."

"With Ashe's sanction?"

"Goodness, no! But Kitty, as you are aware"—Mrs. Alcot threw a prudent glance to right and left—"goes her own way. She believes she can be of great service to her husband's policy."

Darrell's lip twitched.

"If you were in Ashe's position, would you rather your wife neglected or supported your political interests?"

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Mrs. Alcot shrugged her shoulders.

"Kitty made a considerable mess of them last year."

"No doubt. She forgot they existed. But I think if I were Ashe, I should be more afraid of her remembering. By-the-way—the glass here seems to be at 'Set Fair'?"

His interrogative smile was not wholly good-natured. But mere benevolence was not what the world asked of Philip Darrell—even in the case of his old friends.

"Astonishing!" said Mrs. Alcot, with lifted brows. "Kitty is immensely proud of him—and immensely ambitious. That, of course, accounts for Lord Parham's visit."

"Lord Parham!" cried Darrell, bounding on his seat. "Lord Parham!—coming here?"

"He arrives to-morrow. On his way from Scotland—to Windsor."

Mrs. Alcot enjoyed the effect of her communication on her companion. He sat open-mouthed, evidently startled out of all self-command.

"Why, I thought that Lady Kitty—"

"Had vowed vengeance? So, in a sense, she has. It is understood that she and Lady Parham don't meet, except—"

"On formal occasions, and to take in the groundlings," said Darrell, too impatient to let her finish her sentence. "Yes, that I gathered. But you mean that *Lord* Parham is to be allowed to make his peace?"

Madeleine Alcot lay back and laughed.

"Kitty wishes to try her hand at managing him."

Darrell joined her in mirth. The notion of the white-haired, bullet-headed, shrewd, and masterful man who at that moment held the Premiership of

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England managed by Kitty, or any other daughter of Eve—always excepting his wife—must needs strike those who had the slightest acquaintance with Lord Parham as a delicious absurdity.

Suddenly Darrell checked himself, and bent forward.

"Where—if I may ask—is the poet?"

"Geoffrey? Somewhere in the Balkans, isn't he?—making a revolution."

Darrell nodded.

"I remember. They say he is with the revolutionary committee at Marinitza. Meanwhile there is a new volume of poems out—to-day," said Darrell, glancing at a newspaper thrown down beside him.

"I have seen it. The 'portrait' at the end—"

"Is Lady Kitty." They spoke under their breaths.

"Unmistakable, I think," said Kitty's best friend. "As poetry, it seems to me the best thing in the book, but the audacity of it!" She raised her eyebrows in a half-unwilling, half-contemptuous admiration.

"Has she seen it?"

Mrs. Alcot replied that she had not noticed any copy in the house, and that Kitty had not spoken of it, which, given the Kitty-nature, she probably would have done, had it reached her.

Then they both fell into reverie, from which Darrell emerged with the remark:

"I gather that last year some very important person interfered?"

This opened another line of gossip, in which, however, Mrs. Alcot showed herself equally well informed. It was commonly reported, at any rate, that the old Duke of Morecambe, the head of Lady Eleanor Cliffe's family,

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the great Tory evangelical of the north, who was a sort of patriarch in English political and aristocratic life, had been induced by some undefined pressure to speak very plainly to his kinsman on the subject of Lady Kitty Ashe. Cliffe had expectations from the duke which were not to be trifled with. He had, accordingly, swallowed the lecture, and, after the loss of his election, had again left England with an important newspaper commission to watch events in the Balkans.

"May he stay there!" said Darrell. "Of course, the whole thing was absurdly exaggerated."

"Was it?" said Mrs. Alcot, coolly. "Kitty richly deserved most of what was said." Then—on his start—"Don't misunderstand me, of course. If twenty actions for divorce were given against Kitty, I should believe nothing—*nothing!*" The words were as emphatic as voice and gesture could make them. "But as for the tales that people who hate her tell of her, and will go on telling of her—"

"They are merely the harvest of what she has sown?"

"Naturally. Poor Kitty!"

Madeleine Alcot rested her thin cheek on a still frailer hand and looked pensively out into the darkness of the cedars. Her tone was neither patronizing nor unkind; rather, the shade of ironic tenderness which it expressed suited the subject, and that curious intimacy which had of late sprung up between herself and Darrell. She had begun, as we have seen, by treating him *de haut en bas*. He had repaid her with manner of the same type; in this respect he was a match for any Archangel. Then some accident—perhaps the publication by the man of a volume of essays which expressed to per-

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fection his acid and embittered talent—perhaps a casual meeting at a northern country-house, where the lady had found the man of letters her only resource amid a crowd of uncongenial nonentities—had shown them their natural compatibility. Both were in a secret revolt against circumstance and their own lives; but whereas the reasons for the man's attitude—his jealousies, defeats, and ambitions—were fairly well understood by the woman, he was almost as much in the dark about her as when their friendship began.

He knew her husband slightly—an eager, gifted fellow, of late years a strong High Churchman, and well known in a certain group as the friend of Mrs. Armagh, that muse—fragile, austere, and beautiful—of several great men, and great Christians, among the older generation. Mrs. Alcot had her own intimates, generally men; but she tired of them and changed them often. Mr. Alcot spent part of every year within reach of the Cornish home of Mrs. Armagh; and during that time his wife made her round of visits.

Meanwhile her thin lips were sealed as to her own affairs. Certainly she made the impression of an unhappy woman, and Darrell was convinced of some tragic complication. But neither he nor any one of whom he had yet inquired had any idea what it might be.

"By-the-way—where is Lady Kitty?—and are there many people here?"

Darrell turned, as he spoke, to scrutinize the house and its approaches. Haggart Hall was a large and commonplace mansion, standing in the midst of spreading "grounds" and dull plantations, beyond which could be sometimes seen the tall chimneys of neighboring coal-

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mines. It wore an air of middle-class Tory comfort which brought a smile to Darrell's countenance as he surveyed it.

"Kitty is at the Agricultural Show—with a party."

"Playing the great lady? *What* a house!"

"Yes. Kitty abhors it. But it will do very well for the party to-morrow."

"Half the county—that kind of thing?"

"*All* the county — some royalties — and Lord Parham."

"Lord Parham being the end and aim? I thought I heard wheels."

Mrs. Alcot rose, and they strolled back towards the house.

"And the party?" resumed Darrell.

"Not particularly thrilling. Lord Grosville—"

"Also, I presume, *en garçon*."

Mrs. Alcot smiled.

"—the Manleys, Lady Tranmore, Miss French, the Dean of Milford and his wife, Eddie Helston—"

"That, I understand, is Lady Kitty's undergraduate adorer?"

"It's no use talking to you—you know all the gossip. And some county big-wigs, whose names I can't remember—come to dinner to-night." Mrs. Alcot stifled a yawn.

"I am very curious to see how Ashe takes his triumph," said Darrell, as they paused half-way.

"He is just the same. No!" said Madeleine Alcot, correcting herself — "no — not quite. He *meant* to triumph, and he *knows* that he has done so."

"My dear lady!" cried Darrell—"a quite *enormous*

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difference! Ashe never took stock of himself or his prospects in his life before."

"Well, now—you will find he takes stock of a good many things."

"Including Lady Kitty?"

His companion smiled.

"He won't let her interfere again."

"*L'homme propose*," said Darrell. "You mean he has grown ambitious?"

Mrs. Alcot seemed to find it difficult to cope with these high things. Fanning herself, she languidly supposed that the English political passion, so strong and unspent still in the aristocratic families, had laid serious hold at last on William Ashe. He had great schemes of reform, and, do what he might to conceal it, his heart was in them. His wife, therefore, was no longer his occupation, but—

Mrs. Alcot hesitated for a word.

"Scarcely his repose?" laughed Darrell.

"I really won't discuss Kitty any more," said Mrs. Alcot, impatiently. "Here they are! Hullo! What has Kitty got hold of now?"

Three carriages were driving up the long approach, one behind the other. In the first sat Kitty, a figure beside her in the dress of a nurse, and opposite to them both an indistinguishable bundle, which presently revealed a head. The carriage drew up at the steps. Kitty jumped down, and she and the nurse lifted the bundle out. Footmen appeared; some guests from the next carriage went to help; there was a general movement and agitation, in the midst of which Kitty and her companions disappeared into the house.

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Lady Edith Manley and Lord Grosville began to cross the lawn.

"What is the matter?" asked Mrs. Alcot, as they converged.

"Kitty ran over a boy," said Lord Grosville, in evident annoyance. "The rascal hadn't a scratch, but Kitty must needs pick him up and drive him home with a nurse. 'I ain't hurt, mum,' says the boy. 'Oh! but you must be,' said Kitty. I offered to take him to his mother and give him half a crown. 'It's my duty to look after him,' says Kitty. And she lifted him up herself—dirty little vagabond!—and put him in the carriage. There were some laborers and grooms standing near, and one of them sang out, 'Three cheers for Lady Kitty Ashe!' Such a ridiculous scene as you never saw!"

The old man shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"Lady Kitty is always so kind," said the amicable Lady Edith. "But her pretty dress—I *was* sorry!"

"Oh no—only an excuse for a new one," said Mrs. Alcot.

The Dean and Lady Tranmore approached—behind them again Ashe and Mrs. Winston.

"Well, old fellow!" said Ashe, clapping a hand on Darrell's shoulder. "Uncommonly glad to see you. You look as though that damned London had been squeezing the life out of you. Come for a stroll before dinner?"

The two men accordingly left the talkers on the lawn, and struck into the park. Ashe, in a straw hat and light suit, made his usual impression of strength and good-humor. He was gay, friendly, amusing as ever. But Darrell was not long in discovering or imagining signs of

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change. Any one else would have thought Ashe's talk frankness—nay, indiscretion—itself. Darrell at once divined or imagined in it shades of official reserve, tracts of reticence, such as an old friend had a right to resent.

"One can see what a personage he feels himself!"

Yet Darrell would have been the first to own that Ashe had some right to feel himself a personage. The sudden revelation of his full intellectual power, and of his influence in the country, for which the general election of the preceding winter had provided the opportunity, was still an exciting memory among journalists and politicians. He had gone into the election a man slightly discredited, on whose future nobody took much trouble to speculate. He had emerged from it—after a series of speeches laying down the principles and vindicating the action of his party—one of the most important men in England, with whom Lord Parham himself must henceforth treat on quasi-equal terms. Ashe was now Home Secretary, and, if Lord Parham's gout should take an evil turn, there was no saying to what height fortune might not soon conduct him.

The will—the iron purpose—with which it had all been done—that was the amazing part of it. The complete independence, moreover. Darrell imagined that Lord Parham must often have regretted the small intrigue by which Ashe's promotion had been barred in the crisis of the summer. It had roused an indolent man to action, and freed him from any particular obligation towards the leader who had ill-treated him. Ashe's campaign had not been in all respects convenient; but Lord Parham had had to put up with it.

The summer evening broadened as the two men

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sauntered on through the park, beside a small stream fringed with yellow flags. Even the dingy Midland landscape, with its smoke-blackened woods and lifeless grass, assumed a glory of great light; the soft, interlacing clouds parted before the dying sun; the water received the golden flood, and each coot and water-hen shone jet and glossy in the blaze. A few cries of birds, the distant shouts of harvesters, the rustling of the water-flags along the stream, these were the only sounds—traditional sounds of English peace.

"Jolly, isn't it?" said Ashe, looking round him—"even this spoiled country! Why did we go and stifle in that beastly show!"

The sensuous pleasure and relaxation of his mood communicated itself to Darrell. They talked more intimately, more freely than they had done for months. Darrell's gnawing consciousness of his own meaner fortunes, as contrasted with the brilliant and expanding career of his school-friend, softened and relaxed. He almost forgave Ashe the successes of the winter, and that subtly heightened tone of authority and self-confidence which here and there bore witness to them in the manner or talk of the minister. They scarcely touched on politics, however. Both were tired, and their talk drifted into the characteristic male gossip—"What's —— doing now?" "Do you ever see So-and-so?" "You remember that fellow at Univ.?"—and the like, to the agreeable accompaniment of Ashe's best cigars.

So pleasant was the half-hour, so strongly had the old college intimacy reasserted itself, that suddenly a thought struck upward in Darrell's mind. He had not come to Haggart bent merely on idle holiday—far from

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it. At the moment he was weary of literature as a profession, and sharply conscious that the time for vague ambitions had gone by. A post had presented itself, a post of importance, in the gift of the Home Office. It meant, no doubt, the abandonment of more brilliant things; Darrell was content to abandon them. His determination to apply for it seemed, indeed, to himself an act of modesty—almost of sacrifice. As to the technical qualifications required, he was well aware there might be other men better equipped than himself. But, after all, to what may not general ability aspire—general ability properly stiffened with interest?

And as to interest, when was it ever to serve him if not now—through his old friendship with Ashe? Chivalry towards a much-solicited mortal, also your friend—even the subtler self-love—might have counselled silence—or at least approaches more gradual. It had been far from his purpose, indeed, to speak so promptly. But here were the hour and the man! And there, in a distant country town, a woman—whereof the mere existence was unsuspected by Darrell's country-house acquaintance—sat waiting, in whose eyes the post in question loomed as a condition—perhaps indispensable. Darrell's secret eagerness could not withstand the temptation.

So, with a nervous beginning—"By-the-way, I wished to consult you about a personal matter. Of course, answer or not, as you like. Naturally, I understand the difficulties!"—the plunge was taken, and the petitioner soon in full career.

After a first start—a lifted brow of astonishment—Ashe was uncomfortably silent—till suddenly, in a pause

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of Darrell's eloquence, his face changed, and with a burst of his old, careless freedom and affection, he flung an arm along Darrell's shoulder, with an impetuous—

"I say, old fellow—don't—don't be a damned fool!"

An ashen white overspread the countenance of the man thus addressed. His lips twitched. He walked on in silence. Ashe looked at him—stammered:

"Why, my dear Philip, it would be the extinguishing of you!"

Darrell said nothing. Ashe, still holding his friend captive, descanted hurriedly on the disadvantages of the post "for a man of your gifts," then—more cautiously—on its special requirements, not one of which did Darrell possess—hinted at the men applying for it, at the scientific and professional influences then playing upon himself, at his strong sense of responsibility—"Too bad, isn't it, that a duffer like me should have to decide these things"—and so on.

In vain. Darrell laughed, recovered himself, changed the subject; but as they walked quickly back to the house, Ashe knew, perchance, that he had lost a friend; and Darrell's smarting soul had scored another reckoning against a day to come.

As they neared the house they found a large group still lingering on the lawn, and Kitty just emerging from a garden door. She came out accompanied by the handsome Cambridge lad who had been her partner at Lady Crashaw's dance. He was evidently absorbed in her society, and they approached in high spirits, laughing and teasing each other.

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"Well, Kitty, how's the bruised one?" said Ashe, as he sank into a chair beside Mrs. Alcot.

"Doing finely," said Kitty. "I shall send him home to-night."

"Meanwhile, have you put him up in my dressing-room? I only ask for information."

"There wasn't another corner," said Kitty.

"There!" Ashe appealed to gods and men. "How do you expect me to dress for dinner?"

"Oh, now, William, don't be tiresome!" said Kitty, impatiently. "He was bruised black and blue"—("Serve him right for getting in the way," grumbled Lord Grosville)—"and nurse and I have done him up in arnica."

She came to stand by Ashe, talking in an undertone and as fast as possible. The little Dean, who never could help watching her, thought her more beautiful—and wilder—than ever. Her eyes—it was hardly enough to say they shone—they glittered—in her delicate face; her gestures were more extravagant than he remembered them; her movements restlessness itself.

Ashe listened with patience—then said:

"I can't help it, Kitty—you really must have him removed."

"Impossible!" she said, her cheek flaming.

"I'll go and talk to Wilson; he'll manage it," said Ashe, getting up.

Kitty pursued him, arguing incessantly.

He lounged along, turning every now and then to look at her, smiling and demurring, his hat on the back of his head.

"You see the difference," said Mrs. Alcot, in Darrell's

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ear. "Last year Kitty would have got her way. This year she won't."

Darrell shrugged his shoulders.

"These domesticities should be kept out of sight, don't you think?"

Madeleine Alcot looked at him curiously.

"Did you have a pleasant walk?" she said.

Darrell made a little face.

"The great man was condescending."

Madeleine Alcot's face was still interrogative.

"A touch of the *folie des grandeurs*?"

"Well, who escapes it?" said Darrell, bitterly.

Most of the party had dispersed. Only Lady Tranmore and Margaret French were on the lawn. Margaret was writing some household notes for Kitty; Lady Tranmore sat in meditation, with a book before her which she was not reading. Miss French glanced at her from time to time. Ashe's mother was beginning to show the weight of years far more plainly than she had yet done. In these last three years the face had perceptibly altered; so had the hair. The long strain of nursing, and that pathetic change which makes of the husband who has been a woman's pride and shelter her half-conscious dependent, had, no doubt, left deep marks upon a beauty which had so long resisted time. And yet Margaret French believed it was rather with her son than with her husband that the constant and wearing anxiety of Lady Tranmore's life should be connected. All the ambition, the pride of race and history which had been disappointed in her husband had poured themselves into her devotion to her son. She lived now for his happiness

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and success. And both were constantly threatened by the personality and the presence of Kitty.

Such, at least, as Margaret French well knew, was the inmost persuasion—fast becoming a fanaticism—of Ashe's mother. William might, indeed, for the moment have triumphed over the consequences of Kitty's bygone behavior. But the reckless, untamed character was there still at his side, preparing Heaven knew what pitfalls and catastrophes. Lady Tranmore lived in fear. And under the outward sweetness and dignity of her manner was there not developing something worse than fear —that hatred which is one of the strange births of love?

If so, was it just? There were many moments when Margaret would have indignantly denied it.

It was true, indeed, that Kitty's eccentricity seemed to develop with every month that passed. The preceding winter had been marked, first by a mad folly of table-turning—involving the pursuit of a particular medium whose proceedings had ultimately landed him in the dock; then by a headlong passion for hunting, accompanied by a series of new flirtations, each more unseemly than its predecessor, as it seemed to Lady Tranmore. Afterwards—during the general election—a political phase! Kitty had most unfortunately discovered that she could speak in public, and had fallen in love with the sound of her own voice. In Ashe's own contest, her sallies and indiscretions had already begun to do mischief when Lady Tranmore had succeeded in enticing her to London by the bait of a French *clairvoyante*, with whom Kitty nightly tempted the gods who keep watch over the secrets of fate—till William's poll had been declared.

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All this was deplorably true. And yet no one could say that Kitty in this checkered year had done her husband much harm. Ashe was no longer her blind slave; and his career had carried him to heights with which even his mother might have been satisfied. Sometimes Margaret was inclined to think that Kitty had now less influence with him and his mother more than was the just due of each. She—the younger woman—felt the tragedy of Ashe's new and growing emancipation. Secretly—often—she sided with Kitty!

"Margaret!"

The voice was Kitty's. She came running out, her pale-pink skirts flying round her. "Have you seen the babe?"

Margaret replied that he and his nurse were just in sight.

Kitty fled over the lawn to meet the child's perambulator. She lifted him out, and carried him in her arms towards Margaret and Lady Tranmore.

"Isn't it piteous?" said Margaret, under her breath, as the mother and child approached. Lady Tranmore gave her a sad, assenting look.

For during the last six months the child had shown signs of brain mischief—a curious apathy, broken now and then by fits of temper. The doctors were not encouraging. And Kitty varied between the most passionate attempts to rouse the child's failing intelligence and days—even weeks—when she could hardly bring herself to see him at all.

She brought him now to a seat beside Lady Tranmore. She had been trying to make him take notice of a new

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toy. But the child looked at her with blank and glassy eyes, and the toy fell from his hand.

"He hardly knows me," said Kitty, in a low voice of misery, as she clasped her hands round the baby of three, and looked into his face, as though she would drag from it some sign of mind and recognition.

But the blue eyes betrayed no glimmer of response, till suddenly, with a gesture as of infinite fatigue, the child threw itself back against her, laying its fair head upon her breast with a long sigh.

Kitty gave a sob, and bent over him, kissing—and kissing him.

"Dear Kitty!" said Lady Tranmore, much moved. "I think—partly—he is tired with the heat."

Kitty shook her head.

"Take him!" she said to the nurse—"take him! I can't bear it."

The nurse took him from her, and Kitty dried her tears with a kind of fierceness.

"There is the post!" she said, springing up, as though determined to throw off her grief as quickly as possible, while the nurse carried the child away.

The footman brought the letters across the lawn. There were some for Lady Tranmore and for Margaret French. In the general opening and reading that ensued, neither lady noticed Kitty for a while. Suddenly Margaret French looked up. She saw Kitty sitting motionless with a book on her lap, a book of which the wrapper lay on the grass beside her. Her finger kept a page; her eyes, full of excitement, were fixed on the distant horizon of the park; the hurried breathing was plainly noticeable under the thin bodice.

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"Kitty—time to dress!" said Margaret, touching her.

Kitty rose, without a word to either of them, and walked quickly away, her hands, still holding the book, dropped in front of her, her eyes on the ground.

"Oh, Kitty!" cried Margaret, in laughing protest, as she stooped to pick up the litter of Kitty's letters, some of them still unopened, which lay scattered on the grass, as they had fallen unheeded from her lap.

But the little figure in the trailing skirts was already out of hearing.

At dinner Kitty was in her wildest spirits—a sparkling vision of diamonds and lace, much beyond—so it seemed to Lord Grosville—what the occasion required. "Dressed out like a comedy queen at a fair!" was his inward comment, and he already rolled the phrases in which he should describe the whole party to his wife. Like the expected Lord Parham, he was there in sign of semi-reconciliation. Nothing would have induced Kitty to invite her aunt; the memory of a certain Sunday was too strong. On her side, Lady Grosville averred that nothing would have induced her to sit at Kitty's board. As to this, her husband cherished a certain scepticism. However, her resolution was not tried. It was Ashe, in fact, who had invited Lord Grosville, and Lord Grosville, who was master in his own house, and had no mind to break with William Ashe just as that gentleman's company became even better worth having than usual, had accepted the invitation.

But his patience was sorely tried by Kitty. After dinner she insisted on table-turning, and Lord Grosville was dragged breathless through the drawing-room win-

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dow, in pursuit of a table that broke a chair and finally danced upon a flower-bed. His theology was harassed by these proceedings and his digestion upset. The Dean took it with smiles; but then the Dean was a Latitudinarian.

Afterwards Kitty and the Cambridge boy—Eddie Helston—performed a duologue in French for the amusement of the company. Whatever could be understood in it had better not have been understood—such at least was Lord Grosville's impression. He wondered how Ashe—who laughed immoderately—could allow his wife to do such things; and his only consolation was that, for once, the Dean—whose fancy for Kitty was ridiculous! —seemed to be disturbed. He had at any rate walked away to the library in the middle of the piece. Kitty was, of course, making a fool of the boy all through. Any one could see that he was head over ears in love with her. And she seemed to have all sorts of mysterious understandings with him. Lord Grosville was certain they passed each other notes, and made assignations. And one night, on going up himself to bed very late, he had actually come upon the pair pacing up and down the long passage after midnight!—Kitty in such a *negligée* as only an actress should wear, with her hair about her ears—and the boy out of his wits and off his balance, as any one could see. Kitty, indeed, had been quite unabashed—trying even to draw *him* into their unseemly talk about some theatrical nonsense or other; and such blushes as there were had been entirely left to the boy.

He supposed there was no harm in it. The lad was not a Geoffrey Cliffe, and it was no doubt Kitty's mad

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love of excitement which impelled her to these defiances of convention. But Ashe should put his foot down; there was no knowing with a creature so wild and so lovely where these things might end. And after the scandal of last year—

As to that scandal, Lord Grosville, as a man of the world, by no means endorsed the lurid imaginations of his wife. Kitty and Cliffe had certainly behaved badly at Grosville Park—that is to say, judged by any ordinary standards. And the gossip of the season had apparently gathered and culminated round some incident of a graver character than the rest—though nobody precisely knew what it might be. But it seemed that Ashe had at last asserted himself; and if in Kitty's abrupt departure to the country, and the sudden dissolution of the intimacy between herself and Cliffe, those who loved her not had read what dark things they pleased, her uncle by marriage was quite content to see in it a mere disciplinary act on the part of the husband.

Lord Grosville believed that some rumors as to Cliffe's private character had entered into the decisive defeat—in a constituency largely Nonconformist—which had befallen that gentleman at the polls. Poor Lady Tranmore! He saw her anxieties in her face, and was truly sorry for her. At the same time, inveterate gossip that he was, he regarded her with a kind of hunger. If she only *would* talk things over with him! So far, however, she had given him very little opening. If she ever did, he would certainly advise her to press something like a temporary separation on her son. Why should not Lady Kitty be left at Haggart when the next session began? Lord Grosville, who had been a friend of

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Melbourne's, recalled the early history of that great man. When Lady Caroline Lamb had become too troublesome to a political husband, she had been sent to Brocket. And then Mr. Lamb was only Irish Secretary —without a seat in the cabinet. How was it possible to take an important share in steering the ship of state, and to look after a giddy wife at the same time?

Ashe and his guests lingered late below-stairs. When, somewhere about one o'clock, he entered his dressing-room, he was suddenly alarmed by a smell of burning. It seemed to come from Kitty's room. He knocked hastily at her door.

"Kitty!"

No answer. He opened the door, and stood arrested.

The room was in complete darkness save for some weird object in the centre of it, on which a fire was burning, sending up a smoke which hung about the room. Ashe recognized an old Spanish brazier of beaten copper, standing on iron feet, which had been a purchase of his own in days when he trifled with *bric-à-brac*. Upon it, a heap of some light material, which fluttered and crackled as it burned, was blazing and smoking away, while beside it—her profile set and waxen amid the drifts of smoke, her fair hair blanched to whiteness by the strange illumination from below, and all her slight form, checkered with the light and shade of the fire, drawn into a curve of watchfulness, vindictive and intent—stood Kitty.

"What in the name of fortune are you doing, Kitty?" cried Ashe.

She made no answer, and he approached. Then he

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saw that in the centre of the pile, and propped up against some small pieces of wood, a photograph of Geoffrey Cliffe was consuming slow and dismally. The fire had just sent a line across his cheek. The lower limbs were already charred, and the right hand was shrivelling.

All around were letters, mostly consumed; while at the top of the pile above the culprit's head, stuck in a cleft stick, and just beginning to be licked by the flames, was what seemed to be a leaf torn out of a book. The book from which it had apparently been wrenched lay open on a chair near.

Kitty drew a long breath as Ashe came near her.

"Keep off!" she said—"don't touch it!"

"You little goose!" cried Ashe—"what are you about?"

"Burning a coward in effigy," said Kitty, between her teeth.

Ashe thrust his hands into his pockets.

"I wish to God you'd forget the creature, instead of flattering him with these attentions!"

Kitty made no reply, but as she drew the fire together Ashe captured her hand.

"What's he been doing now, Kitty?"

"There are his poems," said Kitty, pointing to the chair. "The last one is about me."

"May I be allowed to see it?"

"It isn't there."

"Ah! I see. You've topped the pile with it. With your leave, I'll delay its doom." He snatched the leaf from its stick, and bending down read it by the light of the burning paper. Kitty watched him, frowning, her hand on her hip, the white wrap she wore over her night-

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dress twining round her in close folds—a slender, brooding sorceress, some Canidia or Simaetha, interrupted in her ritual of hate.

But Ashe was in no mood for literary reminiscence. His lip was contemptuous, his brow angry as he replaced the leaf in its cleft stick, whither the flames immediately pursued it.

"Wretched stuff, and damned impertinence!—that's all there is to say. For Heaven's sake, Kitty, don't let any one suppose you mind the thing—for an instant!"

She looked at him with strange eyes. "But if I do mind it?"

His face darkened to the shade of hers. "Does that mean — that you still think of him — still wish to see him?"

"I don't know," said Kitty, slowly. The fire had died away. Nothing but a few charred remnants remained in the brazier. Ashe lit the gas, and disclosed a tragic Kitty, flushed by the audacity of her last remark. He took her masterfully in his arms.

"That was bravado," he said, kissing her. "You love *me!* And I may be a poor stick, but I'm worth a good many Cliffes. Defy me — and I'll write you a better poem, too!"

The color leaped afresh in Kitty's cheek. She pushed him away, and, holding him, perused his handsome, scornful face, and all the manly strength of form and attitude. Her own lids wavered.

"What a silly scene!" she said, and fell—a little, soft, yielding form—into his arms.

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XV

THE church clock of Haggart village had just struck half-past six. A white, sunny mist enwrapped the park and garden. Voices and shouts rang through the mist; little could yet be seen, but the lawns and the park seemed to be pervaded with bustle and preparation, and every now and then as the mist drifted groups of workmen could be distinguished, marquees emerged, flags floated, and carts laden with benches and trestle-tables rumbled slowly over the roads and tracks of the park.

The house itself was full of gardeners, arranging banks of magnificent flowers in the hall and drawing-rooms, and superintended by the head gardener, a person of much greater dignity than Ashe himself, who swore at any underling making a noise, as though the slumbers of the "quality" in the big house overhead and the danger of disturbing them were the dearest interests of a burdened life.

As to the mistress of the house, at any rate, there was no need for caution. The clocks of the house had barely followed the church clock in striking the half-hour when the workmen on the ground floor saw Lady Kitty come down-stairs and go through the drawing-room window into the garden. There she gave her opinion on the preparations, pushing on afterwards into the park, where she astounded the various contractors and their

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workmen by her appearance at such an hour, and by the vigor and decision of her orders. Finally she left the park behind, just as its broad, scorched surfaces began everywhere to shake off the mist, and entered one of the bordering woods.

She had a basket on her arm, and, when she had found for herself a mossy seat amid the roots of a great oak, she unpacked it. It contained a mass of written pages, some fresh scribbling-paper, ink and pens, and a small portfolio. When they were all lying on the moss beside her, Kitty turned over the sheets with a loving hand, reading here and there.

"It is good!" she said to herself. "I vow it is!"

Dipping her pen in the ink, she began upon corrections. The sun filtered through the thick leafage overhead, touching her white dress, her small shoes, and the masses of her hair. She wore a Leghorn garden-hat, tied with pink ribbons under her chin, and in her morning freshness and daintiness she looked about seventeen. The hours of sleep had calmed the restlessness of the wide, brown eyes; they were full now of gentleness and mirth.

"I wonder if he'll come?"

She looked up and listened. And as she did so, her eyes and sense were seized with the beauty of the wood. The mystery of early solitary hours seemed to be still upon it; both in the sunlight and the shadow there was a magic unknown to the later day. In a clearing before her spread a lake of willow-herb, of a pure bright pink, hemmed in by a golden shore of ragwort. The splash of color gave Kitty a passionate delight.

"Dear, dear world!" She stretched out her hands to it in a childish greeting.

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Then the joy died sharply from her eyes. "How many years left—to enjoy it in—before one dies—or one's heart dies?"

Invariably, now, her moments of sensuous pleasure ended in this dread of something beyond—of a sudden drowning of beauty and delight—of a future unknown and cruel, coming to meet her, like some armed assassin in a narrow path.

William! When it came could William save her? "William is a *darling!*" she said to herself, her face full of yearning.

As for that other—it gave her an intense pleasure to think of the flames creeping up the form and face of the photograph. Should she hear, perhaps, in a week or two that he had been seized with some mysterious illness, like the witch-victims of old? A shiver ran through her, a thrill of repentance—till the bitter lines of the poem came back to memory—lines describing a woman with neither the courage for sin nor the strength for virtue, a "light woman" indeed, whom the great passions passed eternally by, whom it was a humiliation to court and a mere weakness to regret. Then she laughed, and began again with passionate zest upon the sheets before her.

A sound of approaching footsteps on the wood-path. She half rose, smiling.

The branches parted, and Darrell appeared. He paused to survey the oread vision of Lady Kitty.

"Am I not to the minute?" He held up his watch in front of her.

"So you got my note?"

"Certainly. I was immensely flattered." He threw himself down on the moss beside her, his sallow, long-

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chinned face and dark eyes toned to a morning cheerfulness, his dress much fresher and more exact than usual. "But he is one of the men who look so much better in their old clothes!" thought Kitty.

"Well, what can I do for you, Lady Kitty?" he resumed, smiling.

"I wanted your advice," said Kitty—not altogether sure, now that he was there beside her, that she did want it.

"About your literary work?"

She threw him a quick glance.

"Do you know? How do you know? I have been writing a book!"

"So I imagined—"

"And—and—" She broke now into eagerness, bending forward, "I want you to help me get it published. It is a deadly secret. Nobody knows—"

"Not even William?"

"No one," she repeated. "And I can't tell you about it, or show you a line of it, unless you vow and swear to me—"

"Oh! I swear," said Darrell, tranquilly—"I swear."

Kitty looked at him doubtfully a moment—then resumed:

"I have written it at all sorts of times—when William was away—in the middle of the night—out in the woods. *Nobody* knows. You see"—her little fingers plucked at the moss—"I have a good many advantages. If people want 'Society' with a big S, I can give it them!"

"Naturally," said Darrell.

"And it always amuses people—doesn't it?"

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Kitty clasped her hands round her knees and looked at him with candor.

"Does it?" said Darrell. "It has been done a good deal."

"Oh, of course," said Kitty, impatiently, "mine's not the proper thing. You don't imagine I should try and write like Thackeray, do you? Mine's *real* people—*real* things that happened—with just the names altered."

"Ah!" said Darrell, sitting up—"that sounds exciting. Is it libellous?"

"Well, that's just what I want to know," said Kitty, slowly. "Of course, I've made a kind of story out of it. But you'd have to be a great fool not to guess. I've put myself in, and—"

"And Ashe?"

Kitty nodded. "All the novels that are written about politics nowadays—except Dizzy's—are such nonsense, aren't they? I just wanted to describe—from the inside—how a real statesman"—she threw up her head proudly—"lives, and what he does."

"Excellent subject," said Darrell. "Well—anybody else?"

Kitty flushed. "You'll see," she said, uncertainly.

Darrell's involuntary smile was hidden by a bunch of honeysuckle at which he was sniffing. "May I look?" he asked, stretching out a hand for the sheets.

She pushed them towards him, half unwilling, half eager, and he began to turn them over. Apparently it had a thread of story—both slender and extravagant. And on the thread— Hullo!—here was the fancy ball; he pounced upon it. A portrait of Lady Parham— Ye powers! he chuckled as he read. On the next page the

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Chancellor of the Exchequer—snub-nosed *parvenu* and Puritan—admirably caught. Further on a speech of Ashe's in the House—with caricature to right and caricature to left. . . . Ah! the poet!—at last! He bent over the page till Kitty coughed and fidgeted, and he thought it best to hurry on. But it was war, he perceived—open, undignified, feminine war. On the next page, the Archbishop of Canterbury—with Lady Kitty's views on the Athanasian Creed! Heavens! what a book! Next, Royalty itself, not too respectfully handled. Then Ashe again—Ashe glorified, Ashe explained, Ashe intrigued against, and Ashe triumphant—everywhere the centre of the stage, and everywhere, of course, all unknown to the author, the fool of the piece. Political indiscretions also, of the most startling kind, as coming from the wife of a cabinet minister. Allusions, besides, scattered broadcast, to the scandals of the day—material as far as he could see for a dozen libel actions. And with it all, much fantastic ability, flashes of wit and romance, enough to give the book wings beyond its first personal audience—enough, in fact, to secure to all its scandalous matter the widest possible chance of fame.

"Well!"

He rolled over on his elbows, and lay staring at the sheets before him—dumb. What was he to say?

A thought struck him. As far as he could perceive, there was an empty niche.

"And Lord Parham?"

A smile of mischief broadened on Kitty's lips.

"That'll come," she said—and checked herself. Darrell bowed his face on his hands and laughed, unseen. To what sacrificial rite was the unconscious victim hur-

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rying—at that very moment—in the express train which was to land him at Haggart Station that afternoon?

"Well!" said Kitty, impatiently—"what do you think? Can you help me?"

Darrell looked up.

"You know, Lady Kitty, that book can't be published like that. Nobody would risk it."

"Well, I suppose they'll tell me what to cut out."

"Yes," said Darrell, slowly, caught by many reflections—"no doubt some clever fellow will know how near the wind it's possible to sail. But, anyway, trim it as you like, the book will make a scandal."

"Will it?" Kitty's eyes flashed. She sat up radiant, her breath quick and defiant.

"I don't see," he resumed, "how you can publish it without consulting Ashe."

Kitty gave a cry of protest.

"No, no, *no!* Of course he'd disapprove. But then—he soon forgives a thing, if he thinks it clever. And it is clever, isn't it?—some of it. He'd laugh—and then it would be all right. *He'd* never pay out his enemies, but he couldn't help enjoying it if some one else did—could he?" She pleaded like a child.

"'No need to forgive them,'" murmured Darrell, as he rolled over on his back and put his hat over his eyes—"for you would have 'shot them all.'"

Under the shelter of his hat he tried to think himself clear. What *really* were her motives? Partly, no doubt, a childish love of excitement—partly revenge? The animus against the Parhams was clear in every page. Cliffe, too, came badly out of it—a fantastic Byronic mixture of libertine and cad. Lady Kitty had better

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beware! As far as he knew, Cliffe had never yet been struck, with impunity to the striker.

If these precious sheets ever appeared, Ashe's position would certainly be shaken. Poor wretch! — endeavoring to pursue a serious existence, yoked to such an impish sprite as this! His own fault, after all. That first night, at Madame d'Estrées', was not her madness written in her eyes?

"Now tell me, Lady Kitty"—he roused himself to look at her with some attention—"what do you want me to do?"

"To find me a publisher, and"—she stooped towards him with a laughing shyness — "to get me some money."

"Money!"

"I've been so awfully extravagant lately," said Kitty, frankly. "Something really will have to be done. And the book's worth some money, isn't it?"

"A good deal," said Darrell. Then he added, with emphasis—"I really can't be responsible for it in any way, Lady Kitty."

"Of course not. I will never, *never* say I told you! But, you see, I'm not literary—I don't know in the least how to set about it. If you would just put me in communication?"

Darrell pondered. None of the well-known publishers, of course, would look at it. But there were plenty of people who would—and give Lady Kitty a large sum of money for it, too.

What part, however, could he—Darrell—play in such a transaction?

"I am bound to warn you," he said, at last, looking

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up, "that your husband will probably strongly disapprove this book, and that it may do him harm."

Kitty bit her lip.

"But if I tell nobody who wrote it—and you tell nobody?"

"Ashe would know at once. Everybody would know."

"William would know," his companion admitted, unwillingly. "But I don't see why anybody else should. You see, I've put myself in—I've said the most shocking things!"

Darrell replied that she would not find that device of much service to her.

"However—I can no doubt get an opinion for you."

Kitty, all delight, thanked him profusely.

"You shall have the whole of it before you go—Friday, isn't it?" she said, eagerly gathering it up.

Darrell was certainly conscious of no desire to burden himself with the horrid thing. But he was rarely able to refuse the request of a pretty and fashionable woman, and it flattered his conceit to be the sole recipient of what might very well turn out to be a political secret of some importance. Not that he meant to lay himself open to any just reproach whatever in the matter. He would show it to some fitting person—to pacify Lady Kitty—write a letter of strong protest to her afterwards—and wash his hands of it. What might happen then was not his business.

Meanwhile his inner mind was full of an acrid debate which turned entirely upon his interview with Ashe of the day before. No doubt, as an old friend, aware of Lady Kitty's excitable character, he might have felt it his duty

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to go straight to Ashe, *coûte que coûte*, and warn him of what was going on. But what encouragement had been given him to play so Quixotic a part? Why should he take any particular thought for Ashe's domestic peace, or Ashe's public place? What consideration had Ashe shown for *him*? "Tu l'as voulu, Georges Dandin!"

So it ended in his promising to take the MS. to London with him, and let Lady Kitty know the result of his inquiries. Kitty's dancing step as they returned to the house betrayed the height of her spirits.

A rumor flew round the house towards the middle of the day that Harry, the little heir, was worse. Kitty did not appear at luncheon, and the doctor was sent for. Before he came, it was known only to Margaret French that Kitty had escaped by herself from the house and could not be found. Ashe and Lady Tranmore saw the doctor, who prescribed, and would not admit that there was any cause for alarm. The heat had tried the child, and Lady Kitty—he looked round the nursery for her in some perplexity—might be quite reassured.

Margaret found her, wandering in the park—very wild and pale—told her the doctor's verdict, and brought her home. Kitty said little or nothing, and was presently persuaded to change her dress for Lord Parham's arrival. By the time the operation was over she was full as usual of smiles and chatter, with no trace apparently of the mood which had gone before.

Lord Parham found the house-party assembled on the lawn, with Kitty in a three-cornered hat, fantastically garnished at the side with a great plume of white cock's feathers, presiding at the tea-table.

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"Ah!" thought the Premier, as he approached—"now for the tare in Ashe's wheat!"

Nothing, however, could have been more gracious than Kitty's reception of him, or more effusive than his response. He took his seat beside her, a solid and impressive figure, no less closely observed by such of the habitual guests of the political country-houses as happened to be present, than by the sprinkling of local clergy and country neighbors to whom Kitty was giving tea. Lord Parham, though now in the fourth year of his Premiership, was still something of a mystery to his countrymen; while for the inner circle it was an amusement and an event that he should be seen without his wife.

For some time all went well. Kitty's manners and topics were alike beyond reproach. When presently she inquired politely as to the success of his Scottish tour, Lord Parham hoped he had not altogether disgraced himself. But, thank Heaven, it was done. Meanwhile Ashe, he supposed, had been enjoying the pursuits of a scholar and a gentleman?—lucky fellow!

"He has been reading the Bible," said Kitty, carelessly, as she handed cake. "Just now he's in the Acts. That's why, I suppose, he didn't hear the carriage. John!" She called a footman. "Tell Mr. Ashe that Lord Parham has arrived!"

The Premier opened astonished eyes.

"Does Ashe generally study the Scriptures of an afternoon?"

Kitty nodded—with her most confiding smile. "When he can. He says"—she dropped her voice to a theatrical whisper—"the Bible is such a 'd——d interesting' book!"

Lord Parham started in his seat. Ashe and some of

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his friends still faintly recalled, in their too familiar and public use of this particular naughty word, the lurid vocabulary of the Peel and Melbourne generation. But in a lady's mouth the effect was prodigious. Lord Grosville frowned sternly and walked away; Eddie Helston smothered a burst of laughter; the Dean, startled, broke off a conversation with a group of archæological clergymen and came to see what he could do to keep Lady Kitty in order; while Lady Tranmore flushed deeply, and began a hasty conversation with Lady Edith Manley. Meanwhile Kitty, quite unconscious, "went on cutting"—or rather, dispensing "bread-and-butter"; and Lord Parham changed the subject.

"What a charming house!" he said, unwarily, waving his hand towards the Haggart mansion. He was short-sighted, and, in truth, saw only that it was big.

Kitty looked at him in wonder—a friendly and amiable wonder. She said it was very kind of him to try and spare her feelings, but, really, anybody might say what they liked of Haggart. She and William weren't responsible.

Lord Parham, rather nettled, put on his eye-glass, and, being an obstinate man, still maintained that he saw no reason at all to be dissatisfied with Haggart, from the æsthetic point of view. Kitty said nothing, but for the first time a gleam of mockery showed itself in her changing look.

Lady Tranmore, always nervously on the watch, moved forward at this point, and Lord Parham, with marked and pompous suavity, transferred his conversation to her.

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Thus assured, as he thought, of a good listener, and delivered from his uncomfortable hostess, Lord Parham crossed his legs and began to talk at his ease. The guests round the various tea-tables converged, some standing and some sitting, and made a circle about the great man. About Kitty, too, who sat, equally conspicuous, dipping a biscuit in milk, and teasing her small dog with it. Lord Parham meanwhile described to Lady Tranmore—at wearisome length—the demonstrations which had attended his journey south, the railway-station crowds, addresses, and so forth. He handled the topic in a tone of jocular humility, which but slightly concealed the vast complacency beneath. Kitty's lip twitched; she fed Ponto hastily with all possible cakes.

"No one, of course, can keep any count of what he says on these occasions," resumed Lord Parham, with a gracious smile. "I hope I talked some sense—"

"Oh, but why?" said Kitty, looking up, her large fawn's eyes bent on the speaker.

"Why?" repeated Lord Parham, suddenly stiffening. "I don't follow you, Lady Kitty."

"Anybody can talk sense!" said Kitty, throwing a big bit of muffin at Ponto's nose. "It's the other thing that's hard—isn't it?"

"Lady Kitty," said the Dean, lifting a finger, "you are plagiarizing from Mr. Pitt."

"Am I?" said Kitty. "I didn't know."

"I imagine that Mr. Pitt talked sense sometimes," said Lord Parham, shortly.

"Ah, that was when he was drunk!" said Kitty. "Then he wasn't responsible."

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Lord Parham and the circle laughed—though the Premier's laugh was a little dry and perfunctory.

"So you worship nonsense, Lady Kitty?"

Kitty nodded sweetly.

"And so does William. Ah, here he is!"

For Ashe appeared, hurrying over the lawn, and Lord Parham rose to greet his host.

"Upon my word, Ashe, how well you look! *You* have had some holiday!"

"Which is more than can be said of yourself," said Ashe, with smiling sympathy. "Well!—how have the speeches gone? Is there anything left of you? Edinburgh was magnificent!"

He wore his most radiant aspect as he sat down beside his guest; and Kitty watching him, and already conscious of a renewed and excitable dislike for her guest, thought William was overdoing it absurdly, and grew still more restive.

The Premier brought the tips of his fingers lightly together, as he resumed his seat.

"Oh! my dear fellow, people were very kind—too much so! Yes—I think it did good—it did good. I should now rest and be thankful—if it weren't for the Bishops!"

"The Bishops!" said the Rector of the parish standing near. "What have the Bishops been doing, my lord?"

"Dying," said Kitty, as she fell into an attitude which commanded both William and Lord Parham. "They do it on purpose."

"Another this morning!" said Ashe, throwing up his hands.

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"Oh! they die to plague me," said the Prime Minister, with the air of one on whom the universe weighs heavy. "There never was such a conspiracy!"

"You should let William appoint them," said Kitty, leaning her chin upon her hands and studying Lord Parham with eyes all the more brilliant for the dark circles which fatigue, or something else, had drawn round them.

"Ah, to be sure!" said Lord Parham, affably. "I had forgotten that Ashe was our theologian. Take me a walk before dinner!" he added, addressing his host.

"But you won't take his advice," said Kitty, smiling.

The Premier turned rather sharply.

"How do you know that, Lady Kitty?"

Kitty hesitated—then said, with the prettiest, slightest laugh:

"Lady Parham has such strong views—hasn't she?—on Church questions!"

Lord Parham's feeling was that a more insidiously impertinent question had never been put to him. He drew himself up.

"If she has, Lady Kitty, I can only say I know very little about them! She very wisely keeps them to herself."

"Ah!" said Kitty, as her lovely eyebrows lifted, "that shows how little people know."

"I don't quite understand," said Lord Parham. "To what do you allude, Lady Kitty?"

Kitty laughed. She raised her eyes to the Rector, a spare High Churchman, who had retreated uncomfortably behind Lady Tranmore.

"Some one—said to me last week—that Lady Parham had saved the Church!"

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The Prime Minister rose. "I must have a little exercise before dinner. Your gardens, Ashe—is there time?"

Ashe, scarlet with discomfort and annoyance, carried his visitor off. As he did so, he passed his wife. Kitty turned her little head, looked at him half shyly, half defiantly. The Dean saw the look; saw also that Ashe deliberately avoided it.

The party presently began to disperse. The Dean found himself beside his hostess—strolling over the lawn towards the house. He observed her attentively—vexed with her, and vexed for her! Surely she was thinner than he had ever seen her. A little more, and her beauty would suffer seriously. Coming he knew not whence, there lit upon him the sudden and painful impression of something undermined, something consumed from within.

"Lady Kitty, do you ever rest?" he asked her, unexpectedly.

"Rest!" she laughed. "Why should I?"

"Because you are wearing yourself out."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Do you ever lie down—alone—and read a book?" persisted the Dean.

"Yes. I have just finished Renan's *Vie de Jésus!*"

Her glance, even with him, kept its note of audacity, but much softened by a kind of wistfulness.

"Ah! my dear Lady Kitty, let Renan alone," cried the Dean—then with a change of tone—"but are you speaking truth—or naughtiness?"

"Truth," said Kitty. "But—of course—I am in a temper."

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The Dean laughed.

"I see Lord Parham is not a favorite of yours."

Kitty compressed her small lips.

"To think that William should have to take his orders from that man!" she said, under her breath.

"Bear it—for William's sake," said the Dean, softly, "and, meanwhile—take my advice—and don't read any more Renan!"

Kitty looked at him curiously.

"I prefer to see things as they are."

The Dean sighed.

"That none of us can do, my dear Lady Kitty. No one can satisfy his *intelligence*. But religion speaks to the *will*—and it is the only thing between us and the void. Don't tamper with it! It is soon gone."

A satirical expression passed over the face of his companion.

"Mine was gone before we had been a month married. William killed it."

The Dean exclaimed:

"I hear always of his interest in religious matters!"

"He cares for nothing so much—and he doesn't believe one single word of anything! I was brought up in a convent, you know—but William laughed it all out of me."

"Dear Lady Kitty!"

Kitty nodded. "And now, of course, I know there's nothing in it. Oh! I *do* beg your pardon!" she said, eagerly. "I never meant to say anything rude to *you*. And I must go!" She looked up at an open window on the second floor of the house. The Dean supposed it was the nursery, and began to ask after the boy. But

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before he could frame his question she was gone, flying over the grass with a foot that scarcely seemed to touch it.

"Poor child, poor child!" murmured the Dean, in a most genuine distress. But it was not the boy he was thinking of.

Presently, however, he was overtaken by Miss French, of whom he inquired how the baby was.

Margaret hesitated. "He seems to lose strength," she said, sadly. "The doctor declares there is no danger, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Oh! but it's so unlikely!" was her hasty reply. "Don't let's think of it."

Kitty was just giving a last look at herself in the large mirror which lined half one of the sides of her room when Ashe invaded her. She glanced at him askance a little, and when the maid had gone Kitty hurriedly gathered up gloves and fan and prepared to follow her.

"Kitty—one word!"

He caught her in his arm, and held her while he looked down upon her sparkling dress and half-reluctant face. "Kitty, do be nice to that old fellow to-night! It's only for two nights. Take him in the right way, and make a conquest of him—for good. He's been very decent to me in our walk—though you did say such extraordinary things to him this afternoon. I believe he really wants to make amends."

"I do hate his white eyelashes so," said Kitty, slowly.

"What does it matter," cried Ashe, angrily, "whether

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he were a blue-faced baboon!—for two nights? Just listen to him a little, Kitty—that's all he wants. And—don't be offended!—but hold your own small tongue—just a little!"

Kitty pulled herself away.

"I believe I shall do something dreadful," she said, quietly.

A sternness to which Ashe's good-humored face was almost wholly strange showed itself in his expression.

"Why should you do anything dreadful, please? Lord Parham is your guest, and my political chief. Is there any woman in England who would not do her best to be civil to him under the circumstances?"

"I suppose not," said Kitty, with deliberation. "No, I don't think there can be."

"Kitty!"

For the first time Ashe was conscious of real exasperation. What was to be done with a temperament and a disposition like this?

"Do you never think that you have it in your power to help me or to ruin me?" he said, with vehemence.

"Oh yes—often. I mean—to help you—in my own way."

Ashe's laugh was a sound of pure annoyance.

"But please understand, it would be *infinitely* better if you would help me, in *my* way — in the natural, accepted way—the way that everybody understands."

"The way Lord Parham recommends?" Kitty looked at him quietly. "Never mind, William. I *am* trying to help you."

Her eyes shone with the strangest glitter. Ashe was conscious of another of those sudden stabs of anxiety

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about her which he had felt at intervals through the preceding year. His face softened.

"Dear, don't let's talk nonsense! Just look at me sometimes at dinner, and say to yourself, 'William asks me—for his sake—to be nice to Lord Parham.'"

He again drew her to him, but she repulsed him almost with violence.

"Why is he here? Why have we people dining? We ought to be alone—in the dark!"

Her face had become a white mask. Her breast rose and fell, as though she fought with sobs.

"Kitty—what do you mean?" He recoiled in dismay.

"Harry!"—she just breathed the word between her closed lips.

"My darling!" cried Ashe, "I saw Dr. Rotherham myself this afternoon. He gave the most satisfactory account, and Margaret told me she had repeated everything to you. The child will soon be himself again."

"He is *dying!*" said Kitty, in the same low, remote voice, her gaze still fixed on Ashe.

"Kitty! Don't say such things—don't think them!" Ashe had himself grown pale. "At any rate"—he turned on her reproachfully—"tell me *why* you think them. Confide in me, Kitty. Come and talk to me about the boy. But three-fourths of the time you behave as though there were nothing the matter with him—you won't even see the doctor—and then you say a thing like this!"

She was silent a moment; then with a wild gesture of the head and shoulders, as of one shaking off a weight, she moved away—drew on her long gloves—and going

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to the dressing-table, gave a touch of rouge to her cheeks.

"Kitty, why did you say that?" Ashe followed her entreatingly.

"I don't know. At least, I couldn't explain. Now, shall we go down?"

Ashe drew a long breath. His frail son held the inmost depths of his heart.

"You have made the party an abomination to me!" he said, with energy.

"Don't believe me, then—believe the doctor," said Kitty, her face changing. "And as for Lord Parham, I'll try, William—I'll try."

She passed him—the loveliest of visions—flung him a hand to kiss—and was gone.

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XVI

THERE could be no question that in all external matters Lord Parham was that evening magnificently entertained by the Home Secretary and Lady Kitty Ashe. The chef was extravagantly good; the wines, flowers, and service lavish to a degree which made both Ashe and Lady Tranmore secretly uncomfortable. Lady Tranmore in particular detested "show," influenced as much by aristocratic instinct as by moral qualms; and there was to her mind a touch of vulgarity in the entertaining at Haggart, which might be tolerated in the case of financiers and *nouveaux riches*, while, as connected with her William and his wife, who had no need whatever to bribe society, it was unbecoming and undignified. Moreover, the winter had been marked by a financial crisis caused entirely by Kitty's extravagance. A large sum of money had had to be raised from the Tranmore estates; times were not good for the landed interest, and the head agent had begun to look grave.

If only William would control his wife! But Haggart contained one of those fine, slowly gathered libraries which make the distinction of so many English country-houses; and in the intervals of his official work, which even in holiday time was considerable, Ashe could not be beguiled from the beloved company of

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his books to help Kitty sign checks, or scold her about expenditure.

So Kitty signed and signed; and the smaller was Ashe's balance, the more, it seemed, did Kitty spend. Then, of course, every few months, there were deficits which had to be made good. And as to the debts which accumulated, Lady Tranmore preferred not to think about them. It all meant future trouble and clipping of wings for William; and it all entered into that deep and hidden resentment, half anxious love, half alien temperament, which Elizabeth Tranmore felt towards Ashe's wife.

However—to repeat—Lord Parham, as far as the fleshpots went, was finely treated. Kitty was in full force, glittering in a spangled dress, her dazzling face and neck, and the piled masses of her hair, thrown out in relief against the panelled walls of the dining-room with a brilliance which might have tempted a modern Rembrandt to paint an English Saskia. Eddie Helston, on her left, could not take his eyes from her. And even Lord Parham, much as he disliked her, acknowledged, during the early courses, that she was handsome, and in her own way—thank God! it was not the way of any womankind belonging to him—good company.

He saw, too, or thought he saw, that she was anxious to make him amends for her behavior of the afternoon. She restrained herself, and talked politics. And within the lines he always observed when talking to women, lines dictated by a contempt innate and ineradicable, Lord Parham was quite ready to talk politics too. Then —it suddenly struck him that she was pumping him, and with great adroitness. Ashe, he knew, wanted an

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early place in the session for a particular measure in which he was interested. Lord Parham had no mind to give him the precedence that he wanted; was, in fact, determined on something quite different. But he was well aware by now that Ashe was a person to be reckoned with; and he had so far taken refuge in vagueness—an amiable vagueness, by which Ashe, on their walk before dinner, had been much taken in, misled no doubt by the strength of his own wishes.

And now here was Lady Kitty—whom, by-the-way, it was not at all easy to take in—trying to "manage" him, to pin him to details, to wheedle him out of a pledge!

Lord Parham, presently, looked at her with cold, smiling eyes.

"Ah! you are interested in these things, Lady Kitty? Well—tell me your views. You women have such an instinct—"

—whereby the moth was kept hovering round the flame. Till, in a flash, Kitty awoke to the fact that while she had been listening happily to her own voice, taking no notice whatever of the signals which William endeavored to send her from the other end of the table—while she had been tripping gayly through one indiscretion after another, betraying innumerable things as to William's opinions and William's plans that she had infinitely better not have betrayed—Lord Parham had said nothing, betrayed nothing, promised nothing. A quiet smile—a courteous nod—and presently a shade of mockery in the lips—the meaning of them, all in a moment, burst on Kitty.

Her face flamed. Thenceforward it would be difficult to describe the dinner. Conversationally, at Kitty's end

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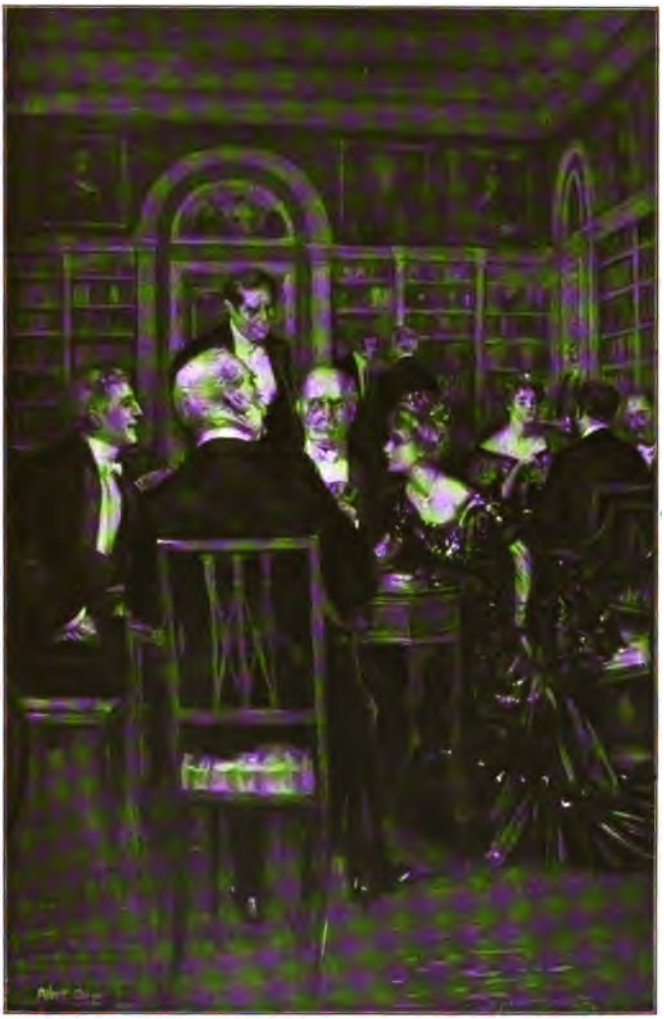

"LADY KITTY AND THE YOUNG MAN CHATTERED AND SPARRED"

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it became an uproar. She started the wildest topics, and Lord Parham had afterwards a bruised recollection as of one who has been dragged or driven, Caliban-like, through brake and thicket, pinched and teased and pelted by elfish fingers, without one single uncivil speech or act of overt offence to which an angry guest could point. With each later course, the Prime Minister grew stiffer and more silent. Endurance was written in every line of his fighting head and round, ungraceful shoulders, in his veiled eyes and stolid mouth. Lady Tranmore gave a gasp of relief when at last Kitty rose from her seat.

The evening went no better. Lord Parham was set down to cards with Kitty, Eddie Helston, and Lord Grosville. Lord Grosville, his partner, played, to the Premier's thinking, like an idiot, and Lady Kitty and the young man chattered and sparred, so that all reasonable play became impossible. Lord Parham lost more than he at all liked to lose, and at half-past ten he pleaded fatigue, refused to smoke, and went to his room.

Ashe was perfectly aware of the failure of the evening, and the discomfort of his guest. But he said nothing, and Kitty avoided his neighborhood. Meanwhile, between him and his mother a certain tacit understanding began to make itself felt. They talked quietly, in corners, of the arrangements for the speech and fête of the morrow. So far, they had been too much left to Kitty. Ashe promised his mother to look into them. He and she combined for the protection of Lord Parham.

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When about one o'clock Ashe went to bed, Kitty either was or pretended to be fast asleep. The room was in darkness save for the faint illumination of a night-light, which just revealed to Ashe the delicate figure of his wife, lying high on her pillows, her cheek and brow hidden in the confusion of her hair.

One window was wide open to the night, and once more Ashe stood lost in "recollection" beside it, as on that night in Hill Street, more than a year before. But the thoughts which on that former occasion had been still as tragic and unfamiliar guests in a mind that repelled them had now, alack, lost their strangeness; they entered habitually, unannounced—frequent, irritating, deplorable.

Had the relation between himself and Kitty ever, in truth, recovered the shock of that incident on the river—of his night of restlessness, his morning of agonized alarm, and the story to which he listened on her return? It had been like some physical blow or wound, easily healed or conquered for the moment, which then, as time goes on, reveals a hidden series of consequences.

Consequences, in this case, connected above all with Kitty's own nature and temperament. The excitement of Cliffe's declaration, of her own resistance and dramatic position, as between her husband and her lover, had worked ever since as a poison in Kitty's mind—Ashe was becoming dismally certain of it. The absurd incident of the night before with the photograph had been enough to prove it.

Well, the thing, he supposed, would right itself in time. Meanwhile, Cliffe had been dismissed, and this foolish young fellow Eddie Helston must soon follow

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him. Ashe had viewed the affair so far with an amused tolerance; if Kitty liked to flirt with babes it was her affair, not his. But he perceived that his mother was once more becoming restless under the general *inconvenance* of it; and he had noticed distress and disapproval in the little Dean, Kitty's stanchest friend.

Luckily, no difficulty there! The lad was almost as devoted to him—Ashe—as he was to Kitty. He was absurd, affected, vain; but there was no vice in him, and a word of remonstrance would probably reduce him to abject regret and self-reproach. Ashe intended that his mother should speak it, and as he made up his mind to ask her help, he felt for the second time the sharp humiliation of the husband who cannot secure his own domestic peace, but must depend on the aid of others. Yet how could he himself go to young Helston? Some men no doubt could have handled such an incident with dignity. Ashe, with his critical sense for ever playing on himself and others; with the touch of moral shirking that belonged to his inmost nature; and, above all, with his half-humorous, half-bitter consciousness that whoever else might be a hero, he was none: Ashe, at least, could and would do nothing of the sort. That he should begin now to play the tyrannous or jealous husband would make him ridiculous both in his own eyes and other people's.

And yet Kitty must somehow be protected from herself! . . . Then—as to politics? Once, in talking with his mother, he had said to her that he was Kitty's husband first, and a public man afterwards. Was he prepared now to make the statement with the same simplicity, the same whole-heartedness?

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Involuntarily he moved closer to the bed and looked down on Kitty. Little, delicate face!—always with something mournful and fretful in repose.

He loved her surely as much as ever—ah! yes, he loved her. His whole nature yearned over her, as the wife of his youth, the mother of his poor boy. Yet, as he remembered the mood in which he had proposed to her, that defiance of the world and life which had possessed him when he had made her marry him, he felt himself—almost with bitterness—another and a meaner man. No!—he was *not* prepared to lose the world for her—the world of high influence and ambition upon which he had now entered as a conqueror. She *must* so control herself that she did not ruin all his hopes—which, after all, were hers—and the work he might do for his country.

What incredible perversity and caprice she had shown towards Lord Parham! How was he to deal with it—he, William Ashe, with his ironic temper and his easy standards? What could he say to her but "Love me, Kitty!—love yourself!—and don't be a little fool! Life might be so amusing if you would only bridle your fancies and play the game!"

As for loftier things, "self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control"— duty—and the passion of high ideals—who was he to prate about them? The little Dean, perhaps!—most spiritual of worldlings. Ashe knew himself to be neither spiritual nor a hypocrite. A certain measure, a certain order and harmony in life—laughter and good-humor and affection—and, for the fight that makes and welds a man, those great political and social interests in the midst of which he found him-

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self—he asked no more, and with these he would have been abundantly content.

He sighed and frowned, his muscles stiffening unconsciously. Yes, for both their sakes he must try and play the master with Kitty, ridiculous as it seemed.

. . . He turned away, remembering his sick child—and went noiselessly to the nursery. There, along the darkened passages, he found a night-nurse, sitting working beside a shaded lamp. The child was sleeping, and the report was good. Ashe stole on tiptoe to look at him, holding his breath, then returned to his dressing-room. But a faint call from Kitty pursued him. He opened the door, and saw her sitting up in bed.

"How is he?"

She was hardly awake, but her expression struck him as very wild and piteous. He went to her and took her in his arms.

"Sleeping quietly, darling—so must you!"

She sank back on her pillows, his arm still round her.

"I was there an hour ago," she murmured. "I shall soon wake up—"

But for the moment she was asleep again, her fair head lying against his shoulder. He sat down beside her, supporting her. Suddenly, as he looked down upon her with mingled passion, tenderness, and pain, a sharp perception assailed him. How thin she was—a mere feather's weight! The face was smaller than ever—the hands skin and bone! Margaret French had once or twice bade him notice this, had spoken with anxiety. He bent over his wife and observed her attentively. It was merely the effect of a hot summer, surely, and of a constant nervous fatigue? He would take her abroad for

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a fortnight in September, if his official work would let him, and perhaps leave her in north Italy, or Switzerland, with Margaret French.

The great day was half-way through, and the throng in Haggart Park and grounds was at its height. A flower-show in the morning; then a tenants' dinner with a speech from Ashe; and now, in a marquee erected for the occasion, Lord Parham was addressing his supporters in the county. Around him on the platform sat the Whig gentry, the Radical manufacturers, the town wire-pullers and local agents on whom a great party depended; in front of him stretched a crowded meeting drawn in almost equal parts from the coal-mining districts to the north of Haggart and from the agricultural districts to the south. . . .

The August air was stifling; perspiration shone on the broad brows and cheeks of the farmers sitting in the front half of the audience; Lord Parham's gray face was almost white; his harsh voice labored against the acoustic difficulties of the tent; effort and heat, discomfort and ennui breathed from the packed benches, and from the short-necked, large-headed figure of the Premier.

Ashe sat to the speaker's right, outwardly attentive, inwardly ashamed of his party and his chief. He himself belonged to a new generation, for whom formulæ that had satisfied their fathers were empty and dead. But with these formulæ Lord Parham was stuffed. A man of average intriguing ability, he had been raised, at a moment of transition, to the place he held, by a consummate command of all the meaner arts of compromise and management, no less than by an invaluable

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power of playing to the gallery. He led a party who despised him—and he complacently imagined that he was the party. His speech on this occasion bristled with himself, and had, in truth, no other substance; the I's swarmed out upon the audience like wasps.

Ashe groaned in spirit, "We have the ideas," he thought, "but they are damned little good to us—it is the Tories who have the men! Ye gods! must we all talk like this at last?" . . .

Suddenly, on the other side of the platform, behind Lord Parham, he noticed that Kitty and Eddie Helston were exchanging signs. Kitty drew out a tablet, wrote upon it, and, leaning over some white-frocked children of the Lord Lieutenant who sat behind her, handed the torn leaf to Helston. But from some clumsiness he let it drop; at the moment a door opened at the back of the platform, and the leaf, caught by the draught, was blown back across the bench where Kitty and the house-party were sitting, and fluttered down to a resting-place on the piece of red baize wheron Lord Parham was standing—close beside his left foot.

Ashe saw Kitty's start of dismay, her scarlet flush, her involuntary movement. But Lord Parham had started on his peroration. The rustics gaped, the gentry sat expressionless, the reporters toiled after the great man. Kitty all the time kept her eyes fixed on the little white paper; Ashe no less. Between him and Lord Parham there was first the Lord Lieutenant, a portly man, very blind and extremely deaf—then a table with a Liberal peer behind it for chairman.

Lord Parham had resumed his seat. The tent was shaken with cheers, and the smiling chairman had risen.

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"Can you ask Lord Parham to hand me on that paper on the floor," said Ashe, in the ear of the Lord Lieutenant, "it seems to have dropped from my portfolio."

The Lord Lieutenant, bending backward behind the chairman as the next speaker rose, tried to attract Lord Parham's attention. Eddie Helston was, at the same time, endeavoring to make his way forward through the crowded seats behind the Prime Minister.

Meanwhile Lord Parham had perceived the paper, raised it, and adjusted his spectacles. He thought it was a communication from the audience—a question, perhaps, that he was expected to answer.

"Lord Parham!" cried the Lord Lieutenant again, "would you—"

"Silence, please! Speak up!"—from the audience, who had so far failed to catch a word of what the new speaker was saying.

"What *is* the matter? You really can't get through here!" said a gray-haired dowager crossly to Eddie Helston.

Lord Parham looked at the paper in mystification. It contained these words:

"Hope you've been counting the 'I's.' I make it fifty-seven. —K."

And in the corner of the paper a thumb-nail sketch of himself, perorating, with a garland of capital I's round his neck.

The Premier's face became brick-red, then gray again. He folded up the paper and put it in his waistcoat-pocket.

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The meeting had broken up. For the common herd, it was to be followed by sports in the park and refreshments in big tents. For the gentry, Lady Kitty had a garden-party to which Royalty was coming. And as her guests streamed out of the marquee, Lord Parham approached his hostess.

"I think this belongs to you, Lady Kitty." And taking from his pocket a folded slip of paper he offered it to her.

Kitty looked at him. Her color was high, her eyes sparkled.

"Nothing to do with me!" she said, gayly, as she glanced at it. "But I'll look for the owner."

"Sorry to give you the trouble," said Lord Parham, with a ceremonious inclination. Then, turning to Ashe, he remarked that he was extremely tired—worn out, in fact—and would ask his host's leave to desert the garden-party while he attended to some most important letters. Ashe offered to escort him to the house. "On the contrary, look after your guests," said the Premier, dryly, and, beckoning to the Liberal peer who had been his chairman, he engaged him in conversation, and the two presently vanished through a window open to the terrace.

Kitty had been joined meanwhile by Eddie Helston, and the two stood talking together, a flushed, excited pair. Ashe overtook them.

"May I speak to you a moment, Kitty?"

Eddie Helston glanced at the fine form and stiffened bearing of his host, understood that his presence counted for something in the annoyance of Ashe's expression, and departed abashed.

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"I should like to see that paper, Kitty, if you don't mind."

His frown and straightened lip brought fresh wildness into Kitty's expression.

"It is my property." She kept one hand behind her.

"I heard you just disavow that."

Kitty laughed angrily.

"Yes—that's the worst of Lord Parham—one has to tell so many lies for his *beaux yeux!*"

"You must give it me, please," said Ashe, quietly. "I ought to know where I am with Lord Parham. He is clearly bitterly offended—by something, and I shall have to apologize."

Kitty breathed fast.

"Well, don't let's quarrel before the county!" she said, as she turned aside into a shrubbery walk edged by clipped yews and hidden from the big lawn. There she paused and confronted him. "How did you know I wrote it?"

"I saw you write it and throw it."

He stretched out his hand. Kitty hesitated, then slowly unclosed her own, and held out the small, white palm on which lay the crumpled slip.

Ashe read it and tore it up.

"That game, Kitty, was hardly worth the candle!"

"It was a perfectly harmless remark—and only meant for Eddie! Any one else than Lord Parham would have laughed. *Then* I might have begged his pardon."

"It is what you ought to do now," said Ashe. "A little note from you, Kitty—you could write it to perfection—"

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"Certainly not," said Kitty, hastily, locking her hands behind her.

"You prefer to have failed in hospitality and manners," he said, bitterly. "Well, I'm afraid if you don't feel any disgrace in it I do. Lord Parham in our *guest!*"

And Ashe turned on his heel and would have left her, when Kitty caught him by the arm.

"William!"

She had grown very pale.

"Yes."

"You've never spoken to me like that before, William—never! But—as I told you long ago, you can stop it all if you like—in a moment."

"I don't know what you mean, Kitty—but we mustn't stay arguing here any longer—"

"No!—but—don't you remember? I told you, you can always send me away. Then I shouldn't be putting spokes in your wheel."

"I don't deny," said Ashe, slowly, "it might be wisest if, next spring, you stayed here, for part at least of the session—or abroad. It is certainly difficult carrying on politics under these conditions. I could, of course, come backward and forward—"

Kitty's brown eyes that were fixed upon his face wavered a little, and she grew even whiter.

"Very well. That would be a kind of separation, wouldn't it?"

"There would be no need to call it by any such name. Oh! Kitty!" cried Ashe, "why can't you behave like a reasonable woman?"

"Separation," she repeated, steadily. "I know that's what your mother wants."

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A wave of sound reached them amid the green shadow of the yews. The cheers that heralded Royalty had begun.

"Come!" said Kitty.

And she flew across the grass, reaching her place by the central tent just as the Royalties drove up.

The Prime Minister sulked in-doors; and Kitty, with the most engaging smiles, made his apologies. The heat —the fatigue of the speech—a crushing headache, and a doctor's order!—he begged their Royal Highnesses to excuse him. The Royal Highnesses were at first astonished, inclined, perhaps, to take offence. But the party was so agreeable, and Lady Kitty so charming a hostess, that the Premier's absence was soon forgotten, and as the day cooled to a delicious evening, and the most costly bands from town discoursed a melting music, as garlanded boats appeared upon the river inviting passengers, and, with the dusk, fireworks began to ascend from a little hill; as the trees shone green and silver and rose-color in the Bengal lights, and amid the sweeping clouds of smoke the wide stretches of the park, the close-packed groups of human beings, appeared and vanished like the country and creatures of a dream—the success of Lady Kitty's fête, the fame of her gayety and her beauty, filled the air. She flashed hither and thither, in a dress embroidered with wild roses and a hat festooned with them—attended always by Eddie Helston, by various curates who cherished a hopeless attachment to her, and by a fat German grand-duke, who had come in the wake of the Royalties.

Her cleverness, her resource, her organizing power were lauded to the skies, Royalty was gracious, and the

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grand-duke resentfully asked an aide-de-camp on the way home why he had not been informed that such a pretty person awaited him.

"I should den haf looked beforehand—as vel as tinking behind," said the grand-duke, as he wrapped himself sentimentally in his military cloak, to meditate on Lady Kitty's brown eyes.

Meanwhile Lord Parham remained closeted in his sitting-room with his secretary. Ashe tried to gain admittance, but in vain. Lord Parham pleaded great fatigue and his letters; and asked for a *Bradshaw*.

"His lordship has inquired if there is a train to-night," said the little secretary, evidently much flustered.

Ashe protested. And, indeed, as it turned out, there was no train worth the taking. Then Lord Parham sent a message that he hoped to appear at dinner.

Kitty locked her door while she was dressing, and Ashe, whose mind was a confusion of many feelings—anger, compunction, and that fascination which in her brilliant moods she exercised over him no less than over others—could get no speech with her.

They met on the threshold of the child's room, she coming out, he going in. But she wrenched herself from him and would say nothing. The report of the little boy was good; he smiled at his father, and Ashe felt a cooling balm in the touch of his soft hands and lips. He descended—in a more philosophical mind; inclined, at any rate, to "damn" Lord Parham. What a fool the man must be! Why couldn't he have taken it with a laugh, and so turned the tables on Kitty?

Was there any good to be got out of apologizing? Ashe supposed he must attempt it some time that night.

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A precious awkward business! But relations had got to be restored somehow.

Lady Tranmore overtook him on the way down-stairs. In the press of the afternoon they had hardly seen each other.

"What is really wrong with Lord Parham, William?" she asked him, anxiously. Ashe hesitated, then whispered a word or two in her ear, begging her to keep the great man in play for the evening. He was to take her in, while Kitty would fall to the Bishop of the diocese.

"She gets on perfectly with the clergy," said Lady Tranmore, with an involuntary sigh. Then, as the sense of humor was strong in both, they laughed. But it was a chilly and perfunctory laughter.

They had no sooner passed into the main hall than Kitty came running down-stairs, with a large packet in her hand.

"Mr. Darrell!"

"At your service!" said Darrell, emerging from the shadows of one of the broad corridors of the ground-floor.

"Take it, please!" said Kitty, panting a little, as she gave the packet into his hands. "If I look at it any more, I *might* burn it!"

"Suppose you do!"

"No, no!" said Kitty, pushing the bundle away, as he laughingly tendered it. "I must see what happens!"

"Is the gap filled?"

She laid her finger on her lips. Her eyes danced. Then she hurried on to the drawing-room.

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Whether it were the soothing presence of the clergy or no, certainly Kitty was no less triumphant at dinner than she had been in the afternoon. The chorus of fun and pleasure that surrounded her, while he himself sat, tired and bored, between Lady Edith Manley and Lady Tranmore, did but make her offence the greater in the eyes of Lord Parham. He had so far buried it in a complete and magnificent silence. The meeting between him and his hostess before dinner had been marked by a strict conformity to all the rules. Kitty had inquired after his headache; Lord Parham expressed his regrets that he had missed so brilliant a party; and Kitty, flirting her fan, invented messages from the Royalties which, as most of those present knew, the Royalties had been far too well amused to think of. Then after this *pas seul*, in the presence of the crowded drawing-room, had been duly executed, Kitty retired to her Bishop, and Lord Parham led forth Lady Tranmore.

"What a lovely moon!" said Lady Edith Manley to the Dean. "It makes even this house look romantic."

They were walking outside the drawing-room windows, on a terrace which was, indeed, the only feature of the Haggart façade which possessed some architectural interest. A low balustrade of terra-cotta, copied from a famous Italian villa, ran round it, broken by large terra-cotta pots now filled with orange-trees. Here and there between the orange-trees were statues transported from Naples in the late eighteenth century by a former Lord Tranmore. There was a Ceres and a Diana, a Vestal Virgin, an Athlete, and an Antinous, now brought into strange companionship under the windows of this

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ugly English house. Chipped and blackened as they were, and, to begin with, of a mere decorative importance, they still breathed into the English evening a note of Italy or Greece, of things lovely and immortal. The lamps in the sitting-rooms streamed out through the widely opened windows upon the terrace, checkering the marble figures, which now emerged sharply in the light, and now withdrew in the gloom; while at one point they shone plainly upon an empty pedestal before which the Dean and his companion paused.

The Dean looked at the inscription. "What a pity! This once held a statue of Hebe holding a torch. It was struck by lightning fifty years ago."

"Lady Kitty might stand for her to-night," said Edith Manley.

For Kitty, the capricious, had appeared at dinner in a *quasi*-Greek dress, white, soft, and flowing, without an ornament. The Dean acquiesced, but rather sadly.

"I wish she had the bloom of Hebe! My dear Lady Edith, our hostess looks *ill!*"

"Does she? I can't tell—I admire her so!" said the woman beside him, upon whose charming eyes some fairy had breathed kindness and optimism from her cradle.

"*Ouf!*" cried Kitty, as she sprang across the sill of the window behind them. "They're *all* gone! The Bishop wishes me to become a vice-president of the Women's Diocesan Association. And I've promised three curates to open bazaars. *Ah, mon Dieu!*" She raised her white arms with a wild gesture, and then beckoned to Eddie Helston, who was close beside her.

"Shall we try our dance?"

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The young men of the house, a group of young guardsmen and diplomats, gathered round, laughing and clapping. Kitty's dancing had become famous during the winter as one of her many extravagances. She no longer recited; literature bored her; motion was the only poetry. So she had been carefully instructed by a *danseuse* from the Opera, and in many points, so the enthusiasts declared, had bettered her instructions. She was now in love with a tempestuous Spanish dance, taught her by a gypsy *señorita* who had been one of the sensations of the London season. It required a partner, and she had been practising it with young Helston, for several mornings past, in the empty ballroom. Helston had spread its praises abroad; and all Haggart desired to see it.

"There!" said Kitty, pointing her partner to a particular spot on the terrace. "I think that will do. Where are the castanets, I wonder?"

"Kitty!" said a voice behind her. Ashe emerged from the drawing-room.

"Kitty, please! It is nearly midnight. Everybody is tired—and you yourself must be worn out! Say good-night, and let us all go to bed."

She turned. Willam's voice was low, but peremptory. She shook back her hair from her temples and neck, with the gesture he had learned to dread.

"Nobody's tired—and nobody wants to go to bed. Please stand out of the way, William. I want plenty of room for my steps."

And she began pirouetting, as though to try the capacities of the space, humming to herself.

"Helston—this must be, please, for another night," said Ashe, resolutely, in the young man's ear. "Lady

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Kitty is much too tired." Then to Lady Edith, and the Dean—"Lady Edith, it would be very kind of you to persuade my wife to go to bed. She never knows when she is done!"

Lady Edith warmly acquiesced, and, hurrying up to Kitty, she tried to persuade her in soft, caressing phrases.

"I stand on my rights!" said the Dean, following her. "If my hostess is used up to-night, there'll be no hostess for me to-morrow."

Kitty looked at them all, silent—her head bending forward, a curious *méchant* look in the eyes that shone beneath the slightly frowning brows. Meanwhile, by her previous order, a footman had brought out two silver lamps and placed them on a small table a little way behind her. Whether it was from some instinctive sense of the beauty of the small figure in the slender, floating dress under the deep blue of the night sky and amid the romantic shadows and lights of the terrace—or from some divination of things significant and hidden—it would be hard to say; but the group of spectators had fallen back a little from Kitty, so that she stood alone, a picture lit from the left by the lamps just brought in.

The Dean looked at her—troubled by her wild aspect and the evident conflict between her and Ashe. Then an idea flashed into his mind, filled always, like that of an innocent child, with the images of poetry and romance.

"One moment!" he said, raising his hand. "Lady Kitty, you spoil us! After amusing us all day, now you would dance for us all night. But your guests won't let you! We love you too well, and we want a bit of

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you left for to-morrow. Never mind! You offered us a dance—you bring us a vision—and a poem!—Friends!"

He turned to those crowding round him, his white hair glistening in the lamplight, his delicate face, so old and yet so eager, the smile on his kind lips, and all the details of his Dean's dress—apron and knee-breeches, slender legs and silver buckles—thrown out in sharp relief upon the dark. . . .

"Friends! you see this pedestal. Once Hebe, the cup-bearer of the gods, stood there. Then—ungrateful Zeus smote her, and she fell! But the Hours and the Graces bore her safe away, into a golden land, and now they bring her back again. Behold her!—Hebe reborn!"

He bowed, his courtly hand upon his breast, and a wave of laughter and applause ran through the young group round him as their eyes turned from the speaker to the exquisite figure of Kitty. Lady Edith smiled kindly, clapping her soft hands. Mrs. Winston, the Dean's wife, had eyes only for the Dean. In the background Lady Tranmore watched every phase of Kitty's looks, and Lord Grosville walked back into the dining-room, growling unutterable things to Darrell as he passed.

Kitty raised her head to reply. But the Dean checked her. Advancing a step or two, he saluted her again—profoundly.

"Dear Lady Kitty!—dear bringer of light and ambrosia!—rest, and good-night! Your guests thank you by me, with all their hearts. You have been the life of their day, the spirit of their mirth. Good-night to Hebe!—and three cheers for Lady Kitty!"

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Eddie Helston led them, and they rang against the old house. Kitty with a fluttering smile kissed her hand for thanks, and the Dean saw her look round—dart a swift glance at Ashe. He stood against the window-frame, in shadow, motionless, his arms folded.

Then suddenly Kitty sprang forward.

"Give me that lamp!" she said to the young footman behind her.

And in a second she had leaped upon the low wall of the terrace and on the vacant pedestal. The lad to whom she had spoken lost his head and obeyed her. He raised the lamp. She stooped and took it. Ashe, who was now standing in the open window with his back to the terrace, turned round, saw, and rushed forward.

"Kitty!—put it down!"

"Lady Kitty!" cried the Dean, in dismay, while all behind him held their breath.

"Stand back!" said Kitty, "or I shall drop it!" She held up the lamp, straight and steady. Ashe paused—in an agony of doubt what to do, his whole soul concentrated on the slender arm and on the brightly burning lamp.

"If you make me speeches," said Kitty, "I must reply, mustn't I? (Keep back, William!—I'm all right.) Hebe thanks you, please—*mille fois!* She herself hasn't been happy—and she's afraid she hasn't been good! *N'importe!* It's all done—and finished. The play's over!—and the lights go out!"

She waved the lamp above her head.

"Kitty! for God's sake!" cried Ashe, rushing to her.

"She is mad!" said Lord Parham, standing at the back. "I always knew it!"

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The other spectators passed through a second of anguish. The bright figure on the pedestal wavered; one moment, and it seemed as though the lamp must descend crashing upon the head and neck and the white dress beneath it; the next, it had fallen from Kitty's hand—fallen away from her—wide and safe—into the depths of the garden below. A flash of wild light rose from the burning oil and from the dry shrubs amid which it fell. Kitty, meanwhile, swayed—and dropped—heavily—unconscious—into William Ashe's arms.

Kitty barely recovered life and sense during the night that followed. And while she was still unconscious her boy passed away. The poor babe, all ignorant of the straits in which his mother lay, was seized with convulsions in the dawn, and gave up his frail life gathered to his father's breast.

Some ten weeks later, towards the end of October, society knew that the Home Secretary and Lady Kitty had started for Italy—bound first of all for Venice. It was said that Lady Kitty was a wreck, and that it was doubtful whether she would ever recover the sudden and tragic death of her only child.

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PART IV

STORM

"Myself, arch-traitor to myself;
My hollowest friend, my deadliest foe,
My clog whatever road I go."

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XVII

"'AMONG the numerous daubs with which Tintoret, to his everlasting shame, has covered this church—'"

"Good Heavens!—what does the man mean?—or is he talking of another church?" said Ashe, raising his head and looking in bewilderment, first at the magnificent Tintoret in front of him, and then at the lines he had just been reading.

"William!" cried Kitty, "*do* put that fool down and come here; one sees it splendidly!"

She was standing in one of the choir-stalls of San Giorgio Maggiore, somewhat raised above the point where Ashe had been studying his German hand-book.

"My dear, if this man doesn't know, who does!" cried Ashe, flourishing his volume in front of him as he obeyed her.

"'Dans le royaume des aveugles,'" said Kitty, contemptuously. "As if any German could even begin to understand Tintoret! But—don't talk!"

And clasping both hands round Ashe's arm, she stood leaning heavily upon him, her whole soul gazing from the eyes she turned upon the picture, her lips quivering, as though, from some physical weakness, she could only just hold back the tears with which, indeed, the face was charged.

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She and Ashe were looking at that "Last Supper" of Tintoret's which hangs in the choir of San Giorgio Maggiore at Venice.

It is a picture dear to all lovers of Tintoret, breathing in every line and group the passionate and mystical fancy of the master.

The scene passes, it will be remembered, in what seems to be the spacious guest-chamber of an inn. The Lord and His disciples are gathered round the last sacred meal of the Old Covenant, the first of the New. On the left, a long table stretches from the spectator into the depths of the picture; the disciples are ranged along one side of it; and on the other sits Judas, solitary and accursed. The young Christ has risen; He holds the bread in His lifted hands and is about to give it to the beloved disciple, while Peter beyond, rising from his seat in his eagerness, presses forward to claim his own part in the Lord's body.

The action of the Christ has in it a very ecstasy of giving; the bending form, indeed, is love itself, yearning and triumphant. This is further expressed in the light which streams from the head of the Lord, playing upon the long line of faces, illuminating the vehement gesture of Peter, the adoring and radiant silence of St. John—and striking even to the farthest corners of the room, upon a woman, a child, a playing dog. Meanwhile, from the hanging lamps above the supper-party there glows another and more earthly light, mingled with fumes of smoke which darken the upper air. But such is the power of the divine figure that from this very darkness breaks adoration. The smoke-wreaths change under the gazer's eye into hovering angels, who float

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round the head of the Saviour, and look down with awe upon the first Eucharist; while the lamp-light, interpenetrated by the glory which issues from the Lord, searches every face and fold and surface, displays the figures of the serving men and women in the background, shines on the household stuff, the vases and plates, the black and white of the marble floor, the beams of the old Venetian ceiling. Everywhere the double ray, the two-fold magic! Steeped in these "majesties of light," the immortal scene lives upon the quiet wall. Year after year the slender, thought-worn Christ raises His hands of blessing; the disciples strain towards Him; the angels issue from the darkness; the friendly domestic life, happy, natural, unconscious, frames the divine mystery. And among those who come to look there are, from time to time, men and women who draw from it that restlessness of vague emotion which Kitty felt as she hung now, gazing, on Ashe's arm.

For there is in it an appeal which torments them—like the winding of a mystic horn, on purple heights, by some approaching and unseen messenger. Ineffable beauty, offering itself—and in the human soul, the eternal human discord: what else makes the poignancy of art—the passion of poetry?

"That's enough!" said Kitty, at last, turning abruptly away.

"You like it?" said Ashe, softly, detaining her, while he pressed the little hand upon his arm. His heart was filled with a great pity for his wife in these days.

"Oh, I don't know!" was Kitty's impatient reply.

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"It haunts me. There's still another to see—in a chapel. The sacristan's making signs to us."

"Is there?" Ashe stifled a yawn. He asked Margaret French, who had come up with them, whether Kitty had not had quite enough sight-seeing. He himself must go to the Piazza and get the news before dinner. As an English cabinet minister, he had been admitted to the best club of the Venice residents. Telegrams were to be seen there; and there was anxious news from the Balkans.

Kitty merely insisted that she could not and would not go without her remaining Tintoret, and the others yielded to her at once, with that indulgent tenderness one shows to the wilfulness of a sick child. She and Margaret followed the sacristan. Ashe lingered behind in a passage of the church, surreptitiously reading an Italian newspaper. He had the ordinary cultivated pleasure in pictures; but this ardor which Kitty was throwing into her pursuit of Tintoret—the Wagner of painting—left him cold. He did not attempt to keep up with her.

Two ladies were already in the cloister chapel, with a gentleman. As Kitty and her friend entered, these persons had just finished their inspection of the damaged but most beautiful "Pietà" which hangs over the altar, and their faces were towards the entrance.

"Maman!" cried Kitty, in amazement.

The lady addressed started, put up a gold-rimmed eye-glass, exclaimed, and hurried forward.

Kitty and she embraced, amid a torrent of laughter and interjections from the elder lady, and then Kitty, whose pale cheeks had put on scarlet, turned to Margaret French.

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"Margaret!—my mother, Madame d'Estrées."

Miss French, who found herself greeted with effusion by the strange lady, saw before her a woman of fifty, marvellously preserved. Madame d'Estrées had grown stout; so much time had claimed; but the elegant gray dress with its floating chiffon and lace skilfully concealed the fact; and for the rest, complexion, eyes, lips were still defiant of the years. If it were art that had achieved it, nature still took the credit; it was so finely done, the spectator could only lend himself and admire. Under the pretty hat of gray tulle, whereof the strings were tied bonnet-fashion under the plump chin, there looked out, indeed, a face gay, happy, unconcerned, proof one might have thought of an innocent past and a good conscience.

Kitty, who had drawn back a little, eyed her mother oddly.

"I thought you were in Paris. Your letter said you wouldn't be able to move for weeks—"

"*Ma chère!—un miracle!*" cried Madame d'Estrées, blushing, however, under her thin white veil. "When I wrote to you, I was at death's door—wasn't I?" She appealed to her companion, without waiting for an answer. "Then some one told me of a new doctor, and in ten days, *me voici!* They insisted on my going away—this dear woman—Donna Laura Vercelli—my daughter, Lady Kitty Ashe!—knew of an apartment here belonging to some relations of hers. And here we are—charmingly *installées!*—and really *nothing* to pay!"—Madame d'Estrées whispered, smiling, in Kitty's ear—"nothing, compared to the hotels. I'm economizing splendidly. Laura looks after every sou. Ah! my dear William!"

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For Ashe, puzzled by the voices within, had entered the chapel, and stood in his turn, open-mouthed.

"Why, we thought you were an invalid."

For, some three weeks before, a letter had reached him at Haggart, so full of melancholy details as to Madame d'Estrées' health and circumstances that even Kitty had been moved. Money had been sent; inquiries had been made by telegraph; and but for a hasty message of a more cheerful character, received just before they started, the Ashes, instead of journeying by Brussels and Cologne, would have gone by Paris that Kitty might see her mother. They had intended to stop there on their way back. Ashe was not minded that Kitty should see more of Madame d'Estrées than necessity demanded; but on this occasion he would have felt it positively brutal to make difficulties.

And now here was this moribund lady, this forsaken of gods and men, disporting herself at Venice, evidently in the pink of health and attired in the freshest of Paris toilettes! As he coldly shook hands, Ashe registered an inner vow that Madame d'Estrées' letters henceforward should receive the attention they deserved.

And beside her was her somewhat mysterious friend of London days, the Colonel Warington who had been so familiar a figure in the gatherings of St. James's Place—grown much older, almost white-haired, and as gentlemanly as ever. Who was the lady? Ashe was introduced, was aware of a somewhat dark and Jewish cast of face, noticed some fine jewels, and could only suppose that his mother-in-law had picked up some one to finance her, and provide her with creature comforts in return for the social talents that Madame d'Estrées still

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possessed in some abundance. He had more than once noticed her skill in similar devices; but, indeed, they were indispensable, for while he allowed Madame d'Estrées one thousand a year, she was, it seemed, firmly determined to spend a minimum of three.

He and Warington looked at each other with curiosity. The bronzed face and honest eyes of the soldier betrayed nothing. "Are you going to marry her at last?" thought Ashe. "Poor devil!"

Meanwhile Madame d'Estrées chattered away as though nothing could be more natural than their meeting, or more perfect than the relations between herself and her daughter and son-in-law.

As they all strolled down the church she looked keenly at Kitty.

"My dear child, how ill you look!—and your mourning! Ah, yes, of course!"—she bit her lip—"I remember—the poor, poor boy—"

"Thank you!" said Kitty, hastily. "I got your letter—thank you very much. Where are you staying? We've got rooms on the Grand Canal."

"Oh, but, Kitty!" cried Madame d'Estrées—"I was so sorry for you!"

"Were you?" said Kitty, under her breath. "Then, please, never speak of him to me again!"

Startled and offended, Madame d'Estrées looked at her daughter. But what she saw disarmed her. For once even she felt something like the pang of a mother. "You're *dreadfully* thin, Kitty!"

Kitty frowned with annoyance.

"It's not my fault," she said, pettishly. "I live on cream, and it's no good. Of course, I know I'm an ob-

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ject and a scarecrow; but I'd rather people didn't tell me."

"What nonsense, *chère enfant!* You're much prettier than you ever were."

A wild and fugitive radiance swept across the face beside her.

"Am I?" said Kitty, smiling. "That's all right! If I had died it wouldn't matter, of course. But—"

"Died! What do you mean, Kitty?" said Madame d'Estrées, in bewilderment. "When William wrote to me I thought he meant you had overtired yourself."

"Oh, well, the doctors said it was touch and go," said Kitty, indifferently. "But, of course, it wasn't. I'm much too tough. And then they fussed about one's heart. And that's all nonsense, too. I couldn't die if I tried."

But Madame d'Estrées pondered—the bright, intermittent color, the emaciation, the hollowness of the eyes. The effect, so far, was to add to Kitty's natural distinction, to give, rather, a touch of pathos to a face which even in its wildest mirth had in it something alien and remote. But she, too, reflected that a little more, a very little more, and—in a night—the face would have dropped its beauty, as a rose its petals.

The group stood talking awhile on the steps outside the church. Kitty and her mother exchanged addresses, Donna Laura opened her mouth once or twice, and produced a few contorted smiles for Kitty's benefit, while Colonel Warington tipped the sacristan, found the gondolier, and studied the guide-book.

As Madame d'Estrées stepped into her gondola, assisted by him, she tapped him on the arm.

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"Are you coming, Markham?"

The low voice was pitched in a very intimate note. Kitty turned with a start.

"A casa!" said Madame d'Estrées, and she and her friend made for one of the canals that pierce the Zattere, while Colonel Warington went off for a walk along the Giudecca.

Kitty and Ashe bade their gondoliers take them to the Piazzetta, and presently they were gliding across waters of flame and silver, where the white front and red campanile of San Giorgio—now blazing under the sunset—mirrored themselves in the lagoon. The autumn evening was fresh and gay. A light breeze was on the water; lights that only Venice knows shone on the tawny sails of fishing-boats making for the Lido, on the white sides of an English yacht, on the burnished prows of the gondolas, on the warm reddish-white of the Ducal Palace. The air blowing from the Adriatic breathed into their faces the strength of the sea; and in the far distance, above that line of buildings where lies the heart of Venice, the high ghosts of the Friulian Alps glimmered amid the sweeping regiments and purple shadows of the land-hurrying clouds.

"This does you good, darling!" said Ashe, stooping down to look into his wife's face, as she nestled beside him on the soft cushions of the gondola.

Kitty gave him a slight smile, then said, with a furrowed brow:

"Who could ever have thought we should find maman here!"

"Don't have her on your mind!" said Ashe, with

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some sharpness. "I can't have anything worrying you."

She slipped her hand into his.

"Is that man going to marry her—at last? She called him 'Markham.' That's new."

"Looks rather like it," said Ashe. "Then *he'll* have to look after the debts!"

They began to piece together what they knew of Colonel Warington and his relation to Madame d'Estrées. It was not much. But Ashe believed that originally Warington had not been in love with her at all. There had been a love-affair between her and Warington's younger brother, a smart artillery officer, when she was the widowed Lady Blackwater. She had behaved with more heart and scruple than she had generally been known to do in these matters, and the young officer adored her—hoped, indeed, to marry her. But he was called on—in Paris—to fight a duel on her account, and was killed. Before fighting, he had commended Lady Blackwater to the care of his much older brother, also a soldier, between whom and himself there existed a rare and passionate devotion; and ever since the poor lad's death, Markham Warington had been the friend and quasi-guardian of the lady—through her second marriage, through the checkered years of her existence in London, and now through the later years of her residence on the Continent, a residence forced upon her by her agreement with the Tranmores. Again and again he had saved her from bankruptcy, or from some worse scandal which would have wrecked the last remnants of her fame.

But, all the time, he was himself bound by strong

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ties of gratitude and affection to an elder sister who had brought him up, with whom he lived in Scotland during half the year. And this stout Puritan lady detested the very name of Madame d'Estrées.

"But she's dead," said Ashe. "I remember noticing her death in the *Times* some three months ago. That, of course, explains it. Now he's free to marry."

"And so maman will settle down, and be happy ever afterwards!" said Kitty, with a sarcastic lifting of the brow. "Why should anybody be good?"

The bitterness of her look struck Ashe disagreeably. That any child should speak so of a mother was a tragic and sinister thing. But he was well aware of the causes.

"Were you very unhappy when you were a child, Kitty?" He pressed the hand he held.

"No," said Kitty, shortly. "I'm too like maman. I suppose, really, at bottom, I liked all the debts, and the excitement, and the shady people!"

"That wasn't the impression you gave me, in the first days of our acquaintance!" said Ashe, laughing.

"Oh, then I was grown up—and there were drawbacks. But I'm made of the same stuff as maman," she said, obstinately—"except that I can't tell so many fibs. That's really why we didn't get on."

Her brown eyes held him with that strange, unspoken defiance it seemed so often beyond her power to hide. It was like the fluttering of some caged thing hungering for it knows not what. Then, as they scanned the patient good-temper of his face, they melted; and her little fingers squeezed his; while Margaret French kept her eyes fixed on the two columns of the Piazzetta.

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"How strange to find her here!" said Kitty, under her breath. "Now, if it had been Alice—my sister Alice!"

William nodded. It had been known to them for some time that Lady Alice Wensleydale, to whom Italy had become a second country, had settled in a villa near Treviso, where she occupied herself with a lace school for women and girls.

The mention of her sister threw Kitty into what seemed to be a disagreeable reverie. The flush brought by the sea-wind faded. Ashe looked at her with anxiety.

"You have done too much, Kitty—as usual!"

His voice was almost angry.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"What does it matter? You know very well it would be much better for you if—"

"If what?"

"If I followed Harry." The words were just breathed, and her eyes shrank from meeting his. Ashe, on the other hand, turned and looked at her steadily.

"Are you quite determined I sha'n't get *any* joy out of my holiday?"

She shook her head uncertainly. Then, almost immediately, she began to chatter to Margaret French about the sights of the lagoon, with her natural trenchancy and fun. But her hand, hidden under the folds of her black cloak, still clung to William's.

"It is her illness," he said to himself, "and the loss of the child."

And at the remembrance of his little son, a wave of sore yearning filled his own heart. Deep under the occupations and interests of the mind lay this passionate regret, and at any moment of pause or silence its "buried

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life" arose and seized him. But he was a busy politician, absorbed even in these days of holiday by the questions and problems of the hour. And Kitty was a delicate woman—with no defence against the torture of grief.

He thought of those first days after the child's death, when in spite of the urgency of the doctors it had been impossible to keep the news from Kitty; of the ghastly effect of it upon nerves and brain already imperilled by causes only half intelligible; of those sudden flights from her nurses, when the days of convalescence began, to the child's room, and, later, to his grave. There was stinging pain in these recollections. Nor was he, in truth, much reassured by his wife's more recent state. It was impossible, indeed, that he should give it the same constant thought as a woman might—or a man of another and more emotional type. At this moment, perhaps, he had literally no *time* for the subtleties of introspective feeling, even had his temperament inclined him to them, which was, in truth, not the case. He knew that Kitty had suddenly and resolutely ceased to talk about the boy, had thrown herself with the old energy into new pursuits, and, since she came to Venice in particular, had shown a feverish desire to fill every hour with movement and sight-seeing.

But was she, in truth, much better—in body or soul? —poor child! The doctors had explained her illness as nervous collapse, pointing back to a long preceding period of overstrain and excitement. There had been suspicions of tubercular mischief, but no precise test was then at command; and as Kitty had improved with rest and feeding the idea had been abandoned. But Ashe was still haunted by it, though quite ready—being a

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natural optimist—to escape from it, and all other incurable anxieties, as soon as Kitty herself should give the signal.

As to the moral difficulties and worries of those months at Haggart, Ashe remembered them as little as might be. Kitty's illness, indeed, had shown itself in more directions than one, as an amending and appeasing fact. Even Lord Parham had been moved to compassion and kindness by the immediate results of that horrible scene on the terrace. His leave-taking from Ashe on the morning afterwards had been almost cordial—almost intimate. And as to Lady Tranmore, whenever she had been able to leave her paralyzed husband she had been with Kitty, nursing her with affectionate wisdom night and day. While on the other members of the Haggart party the sheer pity of Kitty's condition had worked with surprising force. Lord Grosville had actually made his wife offer Grosville Park for Kitty's convalescence—Kitty got her first laugh out of the proposal. The Dean had journeyed several times from his distant cathedral town to see and sit with Kitty; Eddie Helston's flowers had been almost a nuisance; Mrs. Alcot had shown herself quite soft and human.

The effect, indeed, of this general sympathy on Lord Parham's relations to the chief member of his cabinet had been but small and passing. Ashe disliked and distrusted him more than ever; and whatever might have happened to the Premier's resentment of a particular offence, there could be no doubt that a visit from which Ashe had hoped much had ended in complete failure, that Parham was disposed to cross his powerful hench-

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man where he could, and that intrigue was busy in the cabinet itself against the reforming party of which Ashe was the head. Ashe, indeed, felt his own official position, outwardly so strong, by no means secure. But the game of politics was none the less exhilarating for that.

As to Kitty's relation to himself—and life's most intimate and tender things—in these days, did he probe his own consciousness much concerning them? Probably not. Was he aware that, when all was said and done, in spite of her misdoings, in spite of his passion of anxiety during her illness, in spite of the pity and affection of his daily attitude, Kitty occupied, in truth, much less of his mind than she had ever yet occupied?—that a certain magic—primal, incommunicable—had ceased to clothe her image in his thoughts?

Again—probably not. For these slow changes in a man's inmost personality are like the ebb and flow of summer tides over estuary sands. Silent, the main creeps in, or out; and while we dream, the great basin fills, and the fishing-boats come in—or the gentle, pitiless waters draw back into the bosom of ocean, and the sea-birds run over the wide, untenanted flats.

They landed at the Piazzetta as the lamps were being lit. The soft October darkness was falling fast, and on the ledges of St. Mark's and the Ducal Palace the pigeons had begun to roost. An animated crowd was walking up and down in the Piazza, where a band was playing; and on the golden horses of St. Mark's there shone a pale and mystical light, the last reflection from the western sky. Under the colonnades the jew-

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ellers and glass-shops blazed and sparkled, and the warm sea-wind fluttered the Italian flags on the great flag-staffs that but so recently had borne the Austrian eagle.

Ashe walked with his head thrown back, thinking absently, in this centre of Venice, of English politics, and of a phrase of Metternich's he had come across in a volume of memoirs he had been lately reading on the journey:

"Le jour qui court n'a aucune valeur pour moi, excepté comme la veille du lendemain. C'est toujours avec le lendemain que mon esprit lutte."

The phrase pleased him particularly.

He, too, was wrestling with the morrow, though in another sense than Metternich's. His mind was alive with projects; an exultant consciousness both of capacity and opportunity possessed him.

"Why, you've passed the club, William!" said Kitty.

Ashe awoke with a start, smiled at her, and with a wave of the hand disappeared in a stairway to the right.

Margaret French lingered in a bead-shop to make some purchases. Kitty walked home alone, and Margaret, whose watchful affection never failed, knew that she preferred it, and let her go her way.

The Ashes had rooms on the first bend of the Grand Canal looking south. To reach them by land from the Piazza, Kitty had to pass through a series of narrow streets, or *calles*, broken by *campos*, or small squares, in which stood churches. As she passed one of these churches she was attracted by the sound of gay music and by the crowd about the entrance. Pushing aside the leathern curtain over the door, she found herself in

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a great rococo nave, which blazed with lights and decorations. Lines of huge wax candles were fixed in temporary holders along the floor. The pillars were swathed in rose-colored damask, and the choir was ablaze with flowers, and even more brilliantly lit, if possible, than the rest of the church.

Kitty's Catholic training told her that an exposition of the Blessed Sacrament was going on. Mechanically she dipped her fingers into the holy water, she made her genuflection to the altar, and knelt down in one of the back rows.

How rich and sparkling it was—the lights, the bright colors, the dancing music! "*Dolce Sacramento! Santo Sacramento!*" these words of an Italian hymn or litany recurred again and again, with endless iteration. Kitty's sensuous, excitable nature was stirred with delight. Then, suddenly, she remembered her child, and the little face she had seen for the last time in the coffin. She began to cry softly, hiding her face in her black veil. An unbearable longing possessed her. "I shall never have another child," she thought. "*That's* all over."

Then her thoughts wandered back to the party at Haggart, to the scene on the terrace, and to that rush of excitement which had mastered her, she scarcely knew how or why. She could still hear the Dean's voice—see the lamp wavering above her head. "What possessed me! I didn't care a straw whether the lamp set me on fire—whether I lived or died. I wanted to die."

Was it because of that short conversation with William in the afternoon?—because of the calmness with which he had taken that word "separation," which she

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had thrown at him merely as a child boasts and threatens, never expecting for one moment to be taken at its word? She had proposed it to him before, after the night at Hamel Weir; she had been serious then, it had been an impulse of remorse, and he had laughed at her. But at Haggart it had been an impulse of temper, and he had taken it seriously. How the wound had rankled, all the afternoon, while she was chattering to the Royalties! And as she jumped on the pedestal, and saw his face of horror, there was the typical womanish triumph that she had made him *feel*—would make him feel yet more.

How good, how tender he had been to her in her illness! And yet—yet?

"He cares for politics, for his plans—not for me. He will never trust me again—as he did once. He'll never ask me to help him—he'll find ways not to—though he'll be very sweet to me all the time."

And the thought of her nullity with him in the future, her insignificance in his life, tortured her.

Why had she treated Lord Parham so? "I can be a lady when I choose," she said, mockingly, to herself. "I wasn't even a lady."

Then suddenly there flashed on her memory a little picture of Lord Parham, standing spectacled and bewildered, peering into her slip of paper. She bent her head on her hands and laughed, a stifled, hysterical laugh, which scandalized the woman kneeling beside her.

But the laugh was soon quenched again in restless pain. William's affection had been her only refuge in those weeks of moral and physical misery she had just passed through.

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"THE MUSIC SWAYED AND ECHOED THROUGH THE CHURCH"

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"But it's only because he's so terribly sorry for me. It's all quite different. And I can't ever make him love me again in the old way. . . . It wasn't my fault. It's something born in me—that catches me by the throat."

And she had the actual physical sense of some one strangled by a possessing force.

"*Dolce Sacramento! Santo Sacramento!*" . . . The music swayed and echoed through the church. Kitty uncovered her eyes and felt a sudden exhilaration in the blaze of light. It reminded her of the bending Christ in the picture of San Giorgio. Awe and beauty flowed in upon her, in spite of the poor music and the tawdry church. What if she tried religion?—recalled what she had been taught in the convent?—gave herself up to a director?

She shivered and recoiled. How would she ever maintain her faith against William—William, who knew so much more than she?

Then, into the emptiness of her heart there stole the inevitable temptations of memory. Where was Geoffrey? She knew well that he was a violent and selfish man; but he understood much in her that William would never understand. With a morbid eagerness she recalled the play of feeling between them, before that mad evening at Hamel Weir. What perpetual excitement—no time to think—or regret!

During her weeks of illness she had lost all count of his movements. Had he been still writing during the summer for the newspaper which had sent him out? Had there not been rumors of his being wounded—or attacked by fever? Her memory, still vague and weak,

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struggled painfully with memories it could not recapture.

The Italian paper of that morning—she had spelled it out for herself at breakfast—had spoken of a defeat of the insurrectionary forces, and of their withdrawal into the highlands of Bosnia. There would be a lull in the fighting. Would he come home? And all this time had he been the mere spectator and reporter, or fighting, himself? Her pulses leaped as she thought of him leading down-trodden peasants against the Turk.

But she knew nothing. Surely during the last few months he had purposely made a mystery of his doings and his whereabouts. The only sign of him which seemed to have reached England had been that volume of poems—with those hateful lines! Her lip quivered. She was like a weak child—unable to bear the thought of anything hostile and unkind.

If he had already turned homeward? Perhaps he would come through Venice! Anyway, he was not far off. The day before she and Margaret had made their first visit to the Lido. And as Kitty stood fronting the Adriatic waves, she had dreamed that somewhere, beyond the farther coast, were those Bosnian mountains in which Geoffrey had passed the winter.

Then she started at her own thoughts, rose—loathing herself—drew down her veil, and moved towards the door.

As she reached the leathern curtain which hung over the doorway, a lady in front who was passing through held the curtain aside that Kitty might follow. Kitty

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stepped into the street and looked up to say a mechanical "Thank you."

But the word died on her lips. She gave a stifled cry, which was echoed by the woman before her.

Both stood motionless, staring at each other.

Kitty recovered herself first.

"It's not my fault that we've met," she said, panting a little. "Don't look at me so—so unkindly. I know you don't want to see me. Why—why should we speak at all? I'm going away." And she turned with a gesture of farewell.

Alice Wensleydale laid a detaining hand on Kitty's arm.

"No! stay a moment. You are in black. You look ill."

Kitty turned towards her. They had moved on instinctively into the shelter of one of the narrow streets.

"My boy died—two months ago," she said, holding herself proudly aloof.

Lady Alice started.

"I hadn't heard. I'm very sorry for you. How old was he?"

"Three years old."

"Poor baby!" The words were very low and soft. "My boy—was fourteen. But you have other children?"

"No—and I don't want them. They might die, too."

Lady Alice paused. She still held her half-sister by the arm, towering above her. She was quite as thin as Kitty, but much taller and more largely built; and, beside the elaborate elegance of Kitty's mourning, Alice's

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black veil and dress had a severe, conventual air. They were almost the dress of a religious.

"How are you?" she said, gently. "I often think of you. Are you happy in your marriage?"

Kitty laughed.

"We're such a happy lot, aren't we? We understand it so well. Oh, don't trouble about me. You know you said you couldn't have anything to do with me. Are you staying in Venice?"

"I came in from Treviso for a day or two, to see a friend—"

"You had better not stay," said Kitty, hastily. "Maman is here. At least, if you don't want to run across her."

Lady Alice let go her hold.

"I shall go home to-morrow morning."

They moved on a few steps in silence, then Alice paused. Kitty's delicate face and cloud of hair made a pale, luminous spot in the darkness of the *calle*. Alice looked at her with emotion.

"I want to say something to you."

"Yes?"

"If you are ever in trouble—if you ever want me, send for me. Address Treviso, and it will always find me."

Kitty made no reply. They had reached a bridge over a side canal, and she stopped, leaning on the parapet.

"Did you hear what I said?" asked her companion.

"Yes. I'll remember. I suppose you think it your duty. What do you do with yourself?"

"I have two orphan children I bring up. And there

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is my lace-school. It doesn't get on much; but it occupies me."

"Are you a Catholic?"

"Yes."

"Wish I was!" said Kitty. She hung over the marble balustrade in silence, looking at the crescent moon that was just peering over the eastern palaces of the canal. "My husband is in politics, you know. He's Home Secretary."

"Yes, I heard. Do you help him?"

"No—just the other thing."

Kitty lifted up a pebble and let it drop into the water.

"I don't know what you mean by that," said Alice Wensleydale, coldly. "If you don't help him you'll be sorry—when it's too late to be sorry."

"Oh, I know!" said Kitty. Then she moved restlessly. "I must go in. Good-night." She held out her hand.

Lady Alice took it.

"Good-night. And remember!"

"I sha'n't want anybody," said Kitty. "*Addio!*" She waved her hand, and Alice Wensleydale, whose way lay towards the Piazza, saw her disappear, a small tripping shadow, between the high, close-piled houses.

Kitty was in so much excitement after this conversation that when she reached the Campo San Maurizio, where she should have turned abruptly to the left, she wandered awhile up and down the campo, looking at the gondolas on the Traghetto between it and the Accademia, at the Church of San Maurizio, at the rising moon, and

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the bright lights in some of the shop windows of the small streets to the north. The sea-wind was still warm and gusty, and the waves in the Grand Canal beat against the marble feet of its palaces.

At last she found her way through narrow passages, past hidden and historic buildings, to the back of the palace on the Grand Canal in which their rooms were. A door in a small court opened to her ring. She found herself in a dark ground-floor—empty except for the *felze* or black top of a gondola—of which the farther doors opened on the canal. A cheerful Italian servant brought lights, and on the marble stairs was her maid waiting for her. In a few minutes she was on her sofa by a bright wood fire, while Blanche hovered round her with many small attentions.

"Have you seen your letters, my lady?" and Blanche handed her a pile. Upon a parcel lying uppermost Kitty pounced at once with avidity. She tore it open—pausing once, with scarlet cheeks, to look round her at the door, as though she were afraid of being seen.

A book—fresh and new—emerged. *Politics and the Country Houses;* so ran the title on the back. Kitty looked at it frowning. "He might have found a better name!" Then she opened it—looked at a page here and a page there—laughed, shivered—and at last bethought her to read the note from the publisher which accompanied it.

"'Much pleasure—the first printed copy—three more to follow—sure to make a sensation'—hateful wretch! —'if your ladyship will let us know how many presentation copies—' Goodness!—not *one!* Oh—well!—Madeleine, perhaps—and, of course, Mr. Darrell."

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She opened a little despatch-box in which she kept her letters, and slipped the book in.

"I won't show it to William to-night—not—not till next week." The book was to be out on the 20th, a week ahead—three months from the day when she had given the MS. into Darrell's hands. She had been spared all the trouble of correcting proofs, which had been done for her by the publisher's reader, on the plea of her illness. She had received and destroyed various letters from him—almost without reading them—during a short absence of William's in the north.

Suddenly a start of terror ran through her. "No, no!" she said, wrestling with herself—"he'll scold me, perhaps—at first; of course I know he'll do that. And then, I'll make him laugh! He can't—he can't help laughing. I *know* it 'll amuse him. He'll see how I meant it, too. And nobody need ever find out."

She heard his step outside, hastily locked her despatch-box, threw a shawl over it, and lay back languidly on her pillows, awaiting him.

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XVIII

THE following morning, early, a note was brought to Kitty from Madame d'Estrées:

"DARLING KITTY,—Will you join us to-night in an expedition? You know that Princess Margherita is staying on the Grand Canal?—in one of the Mocenigo palaces. There is to be a serenata in her honor to-night—not one of those vulgar affairs which the hotels get up, but really good music and fine voices—money to be given to some hospital or other. Do come with us. I suppose you have your own gondola, as we have. The gondolas who wish to follow meet at the Piazzetta, weather permitting, eight o'clock. I know, of course, that you are not going out. But this is *only* music!—and for a charity. One just sits in one's gondola, and follows the music up the canal. Send word by bearer. Your fond mother,

"MARGUERITE D'ESTRÉES."

Kitty tossed the note over to Ashe. "Aren't you dining out somewhere to-night?"

Her voice was listless. And as Ashe lifted his head from the cabinet papers which had just reached him by special messenger, his attention was disagreeably recalled from high matters of state to the very evident delicacy of his wife. He replied that he had promised to dine with Prince S—— at Danieli's, in order to talk Italian politics. "But I can throw it over in a moment, if you want me. I came to Venice for *you*, darling," he said, as he rose and joined her on the balcony which commanded a fine stretch of the canal.

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"No, no! Go and dine with your prince. I'll go with maman—Margaret and I. At least, Margaret must, of course, please herself!"

She shrugged her shoulders, and then added, "Maman's probably in the pink of society here. Venice doesn't take its cue from people like Aunt Lina!"

Ashe smiled uncomfortably. He was in truth by this time infinitely better acquainted with the incidents of Madame d'Estrées's past career than Kitty was. He had no mind whatever that Kitty should become less ignorant, but his knowledge sometimes made conversation difficult.

Kitty was perfectly aware of his embarrassment.

"You never tell me—" she said, abruptly. "Did she really do such dreadful things?"

"My dear Kitty!—why talk about it?"

Kitty flushed, then threw a flower into the water below with a defiant gesture.

"What does it matter? It's all so long ago. I have nothing to do with what I did ten years ago—nothing!"

"A convenient doctrine!" laughed Ashe. "But it cuts both ways. You get neither the good of your good nor the bad of your bad."

"I have no good," said Kitty, bitterly.

"What's the matter with you, miladi?" said Ashe, half scolding, half tender. "You growl over my remarks as though you were your own small dog with a bone. Come here and let me tell you the news."

And drawing the sofa up to the open window which commanded the marvellous waterway outside, with its rows of palaces on either hand, he made her lie down while he read her extracts from his letters.

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Margaret French, who was writing at the farther side of the room, glanced at them furtively from time to time. She saw that Ashe was trying to charm away the languor of his companion by that talk of his, shrewd, humorous, vehement, well informed, which made him so welcome to the men of his own class and mode of life. And when he talked to a woman as he was accustomed to talk to men, that woman felt it a compliment. Under the stimulus of it, Kitty woke up, laughed, argued, teased, with something of her natural animation.

Presently, indeed, the voices had sunk so much and the heads had drawn so close together that Margaret French slipped away, under the impression that they were discussing matters to which she was not meant to listen.

She had hardly closed the door when Kitty drew herself away from Ashe, and holding his arm with both hands looked strangely into his eyes.

"You're awfully good to me, William. But, you know—you don't tell me secrets!"

"What do you mean, darling?"

"You don't tell me the real secrets—what Lord Palmerston used to tell to Lady Palmerston!"

"How do you know what he used to tell her?" said Ashe, with a laugh. But his forehead had reddened.

"One hears—and one guesses—from the letters that have been published. Oh, I understand quite well! You can't trust me!"

Ashe turned aside and began to gather up his papers.

"Of course," said Kitty, a little hoarsely, "I know it's my own fault, because you used to tell me much more. I suppose it was the way I behaved to Lord Parham?"

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She looked at him rather tremulously. It was the first time since her illness began that she had referred to the incidents at Haggart.

"Look here!" said Ashe, in a tone of decision; "I shall *really* give up talking politics to you if it only reminds you of disagreeable things."

She took no notice.

"Is Lord Parham behaving well to you — now — William?"

Ashe colored hotly. As a matter of fact, in his own opinion, Lord Parham was behaving vilely. A measure of first-rate importance for which he was responsible was already in danger of being practically shelved, simply, as it seemed to him, from a lack of elementary trustworthiness in Lord Parham. But as to this he had naturally kept his own counsel with Kitty.

"He is not the most agreeable of customers," he said, gayly. "But I shall get through. Pegging away does it."

"And then to see how our papers flatter him!" cried Kitty. "How little people know, who think they know! It would be amusing to show the world the real Lord Parham."

She looked at her husband with an expression that struck him disagreeably. He threw away his cigarette, and his face changed.

"What we have to do, my dear Kitty, is simply to hold our tongues."

Kitty sat up in some excitement.

"That man never hears the truth!"

Ashe shrugged his shoulders. It seemed to him incredible that she should pursue this particular topic, after the incidents at Haggart.

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"That's not the purpose for which Prime Ministers exist. Anyway, *we* can't tell it him."

Undaunted, however, by his tone, and with what seemed to him extraordinary excitability of manner, Kitty reminded him of an incident in the life of a bygone administration, when the near relative of an English statesman, staying at the time in the statesman's house, had sent a communication to one of the quarterlies attacking his policy and belittling his character, by means of information obtained in the intimacy of a country-house party.

"One of the most treacherous things ever done!" said Ashe, indignantly. "Fair fight, if you like! But if that kind of thing were to spread, I for one should throw up politics to-morrow."

"Every one said it did a vast deal of good," persisted Kitty.

"A precious sort of good! Yes—I believe Parham in particular profited by it—more shame to him! If anybody ever tried to help me in that sort of way—anybody, that is, for whom I felt the smallest responsibility—I know what I should do."

"What?" Kitty fell back on her cushions, but her eye still held him.

"Send in my resignation by the next post—and damn the fellow that did it! Look here, Kitty!" He came to stand over her—a fine formidable figure, his hands in his pockets. "Don't you ever try that kind of thing—there's a darling."

"Would you damn me?"

She smiled at him—with a tremor of the lip.

He caught up her hand and kissed it. "Blow out my

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own brains, more like," he said, laughing. Then he turned away. "What on earth have we got into this beastly conversation for? Let's get out of it. The Parhams are there—male and female—aren't they?—and we've got to put up with them. Well, I'm going to the Piazza. Any commissions? Oh, by-the-way"—he looked back at a letter in his hands—"mother says Polly Lyster will probably be here before we go—she seems to be touring around with her father."

"Charming prospect!" said Kitty. "Does mother expect me to chaperon her?"

Ashe laughed and went. As soon as he was gone, Kitty sprang from the sofa, and walked up and down the room in a passionate preoccupation. A tremor of great fear was invading her; an agony of unavailing regret.

"What can I do?" she said to herself, as her upper lip twisted and tortured the lower one.

Presently she caught up her purse, went to her room, where she put on her walking things without summoning Blanche, and stealing down the stairs, so as to be unheard by Margaret, she made her way to the back gate of the Palazzo, and so to the streets leading to the Piazza. William had taken the gondola to the Piazzetta, so she felt herself safe.

She entered the telegraphic office at the western end of the Piazza, and sent a telegram to England that nearly emptied her purse of francs. When she came out she was as pale as she had been flushed before—a little, terror-stricken figure, passing in a miserable abstraction through the intricate backways which took her home.

"It won't be published for ten days. There's time.

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It's only a question of money," she said to herself, feverishly—"only a question of money!"

All the rest of the day, Kitty was at once so restless and so languid that to amuse her was difficult. Ashe was quite grateful to his amazing mother-in-law for the plan of the evening.

As night fell, Kitty started at every sound in the old Palazzo. Once or twice she went half-way to the door—eagerly—with hand out-stretched—as though she expected a letter.

"No other English post to-night, Kitty!" said Ashe, at last, raising his head from the finely printed *Poetæ Minores* he had just purchased at Ongania's. "You don't mean to say you're not thankful!"

The evening arrived—clear and mild, but moonless. Ashe went off to dine with his prince, in the ordinary gondola of commerce, hired at the Traghetto; while Margaret and Kitty followed a little later in one which had already drawn the attention of Venice, owing to the two handsome gondoliers, habited in black from head to foot, who were attached to it. They turned towards the Piazzetta, where they were to meet with Madame d'Estrées' party.

Kitty, in her deep mourning, sank listlessly into the black cushions of the gondola. Yet almost as they started, as the first strokes carried them past the famous palace which is now the Prefecture, the spell of Venice began to work.

City of rest!—as it seems to our modern senses—how is it possible that so busy, so pitiless, and covetous a life

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as history shows us should have gone to the making and the fashioning of Venice! The easy passage of the gondola through the soft, imprisoned wave; the silence of wheel and hoof, of all that hurries and clatters; the tide that comes and goes, noiseless, indispensable, bringing in the freshness of the sea, carrying away the defilements of the land; the narrow winding ways, now firm earth, now shifting sea, that bind the city into one social whole, where the industrial and the noble alike are housed in palaces, equal often in beauty as in decay; the marvellous quiet of the nights, save when the northeast wind, Hadria's stormy leader, drives the furious waves against the palace fronts in the darkness, with the clamor of an attacking host; the languor of the hot afternoons, when life is a dream of light and green water, when the play of mirage drowns the foundations of the *lidi* in the lagoon, so that trees and buildings rise out of the sea as though some strong Amphion-music were but that moment calling them from the deep; and when day departs, that magic of the swiftly falling dusk, and that white foam and flower of St. Mark's upon the purple intensity of the sky!—through each phase of the hours and the seasons, *rest* is still the message of Venice, rest enriched with endless images, impressions, sensations, that cost no trouble and breed no pain.

It was this spell of rest that descended for a while on Kitty as they glided downward to the Piazzetta. The terror of the day relaxed. Her telegram would be in time; or, if not, she would throw herself into William's arms, and he *must* forgive her!—because she was so foolish and weak, so tired and sad. She slipped her hand into Margaret's; they talked in low voices of the

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child, and Kitty was all appealing melancholy and charm.

At the Piazzetta there was already a crowd of gondolas, and at their head the *barca*, which carried the musicians.

"You are late, Kitty!" cried Madame d'Estrées, waving to them. "Shall we draw out and come to you?—or will you just join on where you are?"

For the Vercelli gondola was already wedged into a serried line of boats in the wake of the *barca*.

"Never mind us," said Kitty. "We'll tack on somehow."

And inwardly she was delighted to be thus separated from her mother and the chattering crowd by which Madame d'Estrées seemed to be surrounded. Kitty and Margaret bade their men fall in, and they presently found themselves on the Salute side of the floating audience, their prow pointing to the canal.

The *barca* began to move, and the mass of gondolas followed. Round them, and behind them, other boats were passing and repassing, each with its slim black body, its swanlike motion, its poised oarsman, and its twinkling light. The lagoon towards the Guidecca was alive with these lights; and a magnificent white steamer adorned with flags and lanterns—the yacht, indeed, of a German prince—shone in the mid-channel.

On they floated. Here were the hotels, with other illuminated boats in front of their steps, whence spoiled voices shouted, "Santa Lucia," till even Venice and the Grand Canal became a vulgarity and a weariness. These were the "serenate publiche," common and commercial affairs, which the private serenata left behind in con-

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tempt, steering past their flaring lights for the dark waters of romance which lay beyond.

Suddenly Kitty's sadness gave way; her starved senses clamored; she woke to poetry and pleasure. All round her, stretching almost across the canal, the noiseless flock of gondolas—dark, leaning figures impelling them from behind, and in front the high prows and glow-worm lights; in the boats, a multitude of dim, shrouded figures, with not a face visible; and in their midst the *barca*, temple of light and music, built up of flowers, and fluttering scarves, and many-colored lanterns, a sparkling fantasy of color, rose and gold and green, shining on the bosom of the night. To either side, the long, dark lines of thrice-historic palaces; scarcely a poor light here and there at their water-gates; and now and then the lamps of the Traghetti . . . Otherwise, darkness, soundless motion, and, overhead, dim stars.

"Margaret! Look!"

Kitty caught her companion's arm in a mad delight.

Some one for the amusement of the guests of Venice was experimenting on the top of the campanile of St. Mark's with those electric lights which were then the toys of science, and are now the eyes and tools of war. A search-light was playing on the basin of St. Mark's and on the mouth of the canal. Suddenly it caught the Church of the Salute—and the whole vast building, from the Queen of Heaven on its topmost dome down to the water's brim, the figures of saints and prophets and apostles which crowd its steps and ledges, the white whorls, like huge sea-shells, that make its buttresses, the curves and volutes of its cornices and doorways, rushed upon the eye in a white and blinding splendor,

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making the very darkness out of which the vision sprang alive and rich. Not a Christian church, surely, but a palace of Poseidon! The bewildered gazer saw naiads and bearded sea-gods in place of angels and saints, and must needs imagine the champing of Poseidon's horses at the marble steps, straining towards the sea.

The vision wavered, faded, reappeared, and finally died upon the night. Then the wild beams began to play on the canal, following the serenata, lighting up now the palaces on either hand, now some single gondola, revealing every figure and gesture of the laughing English or Americans who filled it, in a hard white flash.

"Oh! listen, Kitty!" said Margaret. "Some one is going to sing 'Ché faro.'"

Miss French was very musical, and she turned in a trance of pleasure towards the *barca* whence came the first bars of the accompaniment.

She did not see meanwhile that Kitty had made a hurried movement, and was now leaning over the side of the gondola, peering with arrested breath into the scattered group of boats on their left hand. The searchlight flashed here and there among them. A gondola at the very edge of the serenata contained one figure beside the gondolier, a man in a large cloak and slouch hat, sitting very still with folded arms. As Kitty looked, hearing the beating of her heart, their own boat was suddenly lit up. The light passed in a second, and while it lasted those in the flash could see nothing outside it. When it withdrew all was in darkness. The black mass of boats floated on, soundless again, save for an occasional plash of water or the hoarse cry of a gondolier—and in the distance the wail for Eurydice.

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"OUT OF THE DARKNESS THE VISION SPRANG, ALIVE AND RICH"

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Kitty fell back in her seat. An excitement, from which she shrank in a kind of terror, possessed her. Her thoughts were wholly absorbed by the gondola and the figure she could no longer distinguish—for which, whenever a group of lamps threw their reflections on the water, she searched the canal in vain. If what she madly dreamed were true, had she herself been seen—and recognized?

The serenata in honor of Italy's beautiful princess duly made its way to the Grand Canal. The princess came to her balcony, while the "Jewel Song" in "Faust" was being sung below, and there was a demonstration which echoed from palace to palace and died away under the arch of the Rialto. Then the gondolas dispersed. That of Lady Kitty Ashe had some difficulty in making its way home against a force of wind and tide coming from the lagoon.

Kitty was apparently asleep when Ashe returned. He had sat late with his hosts—men prominent in the Risorgimento and in the politics of the new kingdom—discussing the latest intricacies of the Roman situation and the prospects of Italian finance. His mind was all alert and vigorous, ranging over great questions and delighting in its own strength. To come in contact with these able foreigners, not as the mere traveller but as an important member of an English government, beginning to be spoken of by the world as one of the two or three men of the future—this was a new experience and a most agreeable one. Doors hitherto closed had opened before him; information no casual Englishman could have commanded had been freely poured out for him; last,

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but not least, he had at length made himself talk French with some fluency, and he looked back on his performance of the evening with a boy's complacency.

For the rest, Venice was a mere trial of his patience! As his gondola brought him home, struggling with wind and wave, Ashe had no eye whatever for the beauty of this Venice in storm. His mind was in England, in London, wrestling with a hundred difficulties and possibilities. The old literary and speculative habit was fast disappearing in the stress of action and success. His well-worn Plato or Horace still lay beside his bedside; but when he woke early, and lit a candle carefully shaded from Kitty, it was not to the poets and philosophers that he turned; it was to a heap of official documents and reports, to the letters of political friends, or an unfinished letter of his own, the phrases of which had perhaps been running through his dreams. The measures for which he was wrestling against the intrigues of Lord Parham and Lord Parham's clique filled all his mind with a lively ardor of battle. They were the children—the darlings—of his thoughts.

Nevertheless, as he entered his wife's dim-lit room the eager arguments and considerations that were running through his head died away. He stood beside her, overwhelmed by a rush of feeling, alive through all his being to the appeal of her frail sweetness, the helplessness of her sleep, the dumb significance of the thin, blue-veined hand—eloquent at once of character and of physical weakness—which lay beside her. Her face was hidden, but the beautiful hair with its childish curls and ripples drew him to her—touched all the springs of tenderness.

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It was a loveliness so full, it seemed, of meaning and of promise. Hand, brow, mouth—they were the signs of no mere empty and insipid beauty. There was not a movement, not a feature, that did not speak of intelligence and mind.

And yet, were he to wake her now and talk to her of the experience of his evening, how little joy would either get out of it.

Was it because she had no intellectual disinterestedness? Well, what woman had! But other women, even if they saw everything in terms of personality, had the power of pursuing an aim, steadily, persistently, for the sake of a person. He thought of Lady Palmerston —of Princess Lieven fighting Guizot's battles—and sighed.

By Jove! the women could do most things, if they chose. He recalled Kitty's triumph in the great party gathered to welcome Lord Parham, contrasting it with her wilful and absurd behavior to the man himself. There was something bewildering in such power—combined with such folly. In a sense, it was perfectly true that she had insulted her husband's chief, and jeopardized her husband's policy, because she could not put up with Lord Parham's white eyelashes.

Well, let him make his account with it! How to love her, tend her, make her happy—and yet carry on himself the life of high office—there was the problem! Meanwhile he recognized, fully and humorously, that she had married a political sceptic—and that it was hard for her to know what to do with the enthusiast who had taken his place.

Poor, pretty, incalculable darling! He would coax

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her to stay abroad part of the Parliamentary season—and then, perhaps, lure her into the country, with the rebuilding and refurnishing of Haggart. She must be managed and kept from harm—and afterwards indulged and spoiled and *fêted* to her heart's content.

If only the fates would give them another child!—a child brilliant and lovely like herself, then surely this melancholy which overshadowed her would disperse. That look—that tragic look—she had given him on the day of the *fête*, when she spoke of "separation"! The wild adventure with the lamp had been her revenge—her despair. He shuddered as he thought of it.

He fell asleep, still pondering restlessly over her future and his own. Amid all his anxieties he never stooped to recollect the man who had endangered her name and peace. His optimism, his pride, the sanguine perfunctoriness of much of his character were all shown in the omission.

Kitty, however, was not asleep while Ashe was beside her. And she slept but little through the hours that followed. Between three and four she was finally roused by the sounds of storm in the canal. It was as though a fleet of gigantic steamers—in days when Venice knew but the gondola—were passing outside, sending a mountainous "wash" against the walls of the old palace in which they lodged. In this languid autumnal Venice the sudden noise and crash were startling. Kitty sprang softly out of bed, flung on a dressing-gown and fur cloak, and slipped through the open window to the balcony.

A strange sight! Beneath, livid waves, lashing the marble walls; above, a pale moonlight, obscured by

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scudding clouds. Not a sign of life on the water or in the dark palaces opposite. Venice looked precisely as she might have looked on some wild sixteenth-century night in the years of her glorious decay, when her palaces were still building and her state tottering. Opposite, at the Traghetto of the Accademia, there were lamps, and a few lights in the gondolas; and through the storm-noises one could hear the tossed boats grinding on their posts.

The riot of the air was not cold; there was still a recollection of summer in the gusts that beat on Kitty's fair hair and wrestled with her cloak. As she clung to the balcony she pictured to herself the tumbling waves on the Lido; the piled storm-clouds parting like a curtain above a dead Venice; and behind, the gleaming eternal Alps, sending their challenge to the sea—the forces that make the land, to the forces that engulf it.

Her wild fancy went out to meet the tumult of blast and wave. She felt herself, as it were, anchored a moment at sea, in the midst of a war of elements, physical and moral.

Yes, yes!—it was Geoffrey. Once, under the skipping light, she had seen the face distinctly. Paler than of old—gaunt, unhappy, absent. It was the face of one who had suffered—in body and mind. But—she trembled through all her slight frame!—the old harsh power was there unchanged.

Had he seen and recognized her — slipping away afterwards into the mouth of a side canal, or dropping behind in the darkness? Was he ashamed to face her —or angered by the reminder of her existence? No doubt it seemed to him now a monstrous absurdity that he should ever have said he loved her! He despised

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her—thought her a base and coward soul. Very likely he would make it up with Mary Lyster now, accept her nursing and her money.

Her lip curled in scorn. No, *that* she didn't believe! Well, then, what would be his future? His name had been but little in the newspapers during the preceding year; the big public seemed to have forgotten him. A cloud had hung for months over the struggle of races and of faiths now passing in the Balkans. Obscure fighting in obscure mountains; massacre here, revolt there; and for some months now hardly an accredited voice from Turk or Christian to tell the world what was going on.

But Geoffrey had now emerged—and at a moment when Europe was beginning perforce to take notice of what she had so far wilfully ignored. *À lui la parole!* No doubt he was preparing it, the bloody, exciting story which would bring him before the foot-lights again, and make him once more the lion of a day. More social flatteries, more doubtful love-affairs! Fools like herself would feel his spell, would cherish and caress him, only to be stung and scathed as she had been. The bitter lines of his "portrait" rung in her ears—blackening and discrowning her in her own eyes.

She abhorred him!—but the thought that he was in Venice burned deep into senses and imagination. Should she tell William she had seen him? No, no! She would stand by herself, protect herself!

So she stole back to bed, and lay there wakeful, starting guiltily at William's every movement. If he knew what had happened!—what she was thinking of! Why on earth should he? It would be monstrous to

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harass him on his holiday—with all these political affairs on his mind.

Then suddenly—by an association of ideas—she sat up shivering, her hands pressed to her breast. The telegram—the book! Oh, but *of course* she had been in time!—*of course!* Why, she had offered the man two hundred pounds! She lay down laughing at herself—forcing herself to try and sleep.

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XIX

SIR RICHARD LYSTER unfolded his *Times* with a jerk.

"A beastly rheumatic hole I call this," he said, looking angrily at the window of his hotel sitting-room, which showed drops from a light shower then passing across the lagoon. "And the dilatoriness of these Italian posts is, upon my soul, beyond bearing! This *Times* is *three* days old."

Mary Lyster looked up from the letter she was writing.

"Why don't you read the French papers, papa? I saw a *Figaro* of yesterday in the Piazza this morning."

"Because I can't!" was the indignant reply. "There wasn't the same amount of money squandered on *my* education, my dear, that there has been on yours."

Mary smiled a little, unseen. Her father had been, of course, at Eton. She had been educated by a succession of small and hunted governesses, mostly Swiss, whose remuneration had certainly counted among the frugalities rather than the extravagances of the family budget.

Sir Richard read his *Times* for a while. Mary continued to write checks for the board wages of the servants left at home, and to give directions for the beating of carpets and cleaning of curtains. It was dull work, and she detested it.

Presently Sir Richard rose, with a stretch. He was a

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tall old man, with a shock of white hair and very black eyes. A victim to certain obscure forms of gout, he was in character neither stupid nor inhuman, but he suffered from the usual drawbacks of his class—too much money and too few ideas. He came abroad every year, reluctantly. He did not choose to be left behind by county neighbors whose wives talked nonsense about Botticelli. And Mary would have it. But Sir Richard's tours were generally one prolonged course of battle between himself and all foreign institutions; and if it was Mary who drove him forth, it was Mary also who generally hurried him home.

"Who was it you saw last night in that ridiculous singing affair?" he asked, as he put the fire together.

"Kitty Ashe—and her mother," said Mary—after a moment—still writing.

"Her mother!—what, that disreputable woman?"

"They weren't in the same gondola."

"Ashe will be a great fool if he lets his wife see much of that woman! By all acounts Lady Kitty is quite enough of a handful already. By-the-way, have you found out where they are?"

"On the Grand Canal. Shall we call this afternoon?"

"I don't mind. Of course, I think Ashe is doing an immense amount of harm."

"Well, you can tell him so," said Mary.

Sir Richard frowned. His daughter's manners seemed to him at times abrupt.

"Why do you see so little now of Elizabeth Tranmore?" he asked her, with a sharp look. "You used to be always there. And I don't believe you even write to her much now."

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"Does she see much of anybody?"

"Because, you mean, of Tranmore's condition? What good can she be to him now? He knows nobody."

"She doesn't seem to ask the question," said Mary, dryly.

A queer, soft look came over Sir Richard's old face.

"No, the women don't," he said, half to himself, and fell into a little reverie. He emerged from it with the remark—accompanied by a smile, a little sly but not unkind:

"I always used to hope, Polly, that you and Ashe would have made it up!"

"I'm sure I don't know why," said Mary, fastening up her envelopes. As she did so it crossed her father's mind that she was still very good-looking. Her dress of dark-blue cloth, the plain fashion of her brown hair, her oval face and well-marked features, her plump and pretty hands, were all pleasant to look upon. She had rather a hard way with her, though, at times. The servants were always giving warning. And, personally, he was much fonder of his younger daughter, whom Mary considered foolish and improvident. But he was well aware that Mary made his life easy.

"Well, you were always on excellent terms," he said, in answer to her last remark. "I remember his saying to me once that you were very good company. The Bishop, too, used to notice how he liked to talk to you."

When Mary and her father were together, "the Bishop" was Sir Richard's property. He only fell to Mary's share in the old man's absence.

Mary colored slightly.

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"MARY LYSTER LOOKED UP FROM THE LETTER"

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"Oh yes, we got on," she said, counting her letters the while with a quick hand.

"Well, I hope that young woman whom he *did* marry is now behaving herself. It was that fellow Cliffe with whom the scandal was last year, wasn't it?"

"There was a good deal of talk," said Mary.

"A rum fellow, that Cliffe! A man at the club told me last week it is believed he has been fighting for these Bosnian rebels for months. Shocking bad form I call it. If the Turks catch him, they'll string him up. And quite right, too. What's he got to do with other people's quarrels?"

"If the Turks will be such brutes—"

"Nonsense, my dear! Don't you believe any of this radical stuff. The Turks are awfully fine fellows—fight like bull-dogs. And as for the 'atrocities,' they make them up in London. Oh, of course, what Cliffe wants is notoriety—we all know that. Well, I'm going out to see if I can find another English paper. Beastly climate!"

But as Sir Richard turned again to the window, he was met by a burst of sunshine, which hit him gayly in the face like a child's impertinence. He grumbled something unintelligible as Mary put him into his Inverness cape, took hat and stick, and departed.

Mary sat still beside the writing-table, her hands crossed on her lap, her eyes absently bent upon them.

She was thinking of the serenata. She had followed it with an acquaintance from the hotel, and she had seen not only Kitty and Madame d'Estrées, but also—the solitary man in the heavy cloak. She knew quite well that Cliffe was in Venice; though, true to her secretive temper, she had not mentioned the fact to her father.

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Of course he was in Venice on Kitty's account. It would be too absurd to suppose that he was here by mere coincidence. Mary believed that nothing but the intervention of Cliffe's mighty kinsman from the north had saved the situation the year before. Kitty would certainly have betrayed her husband but for the *force majeure* arrayed against her. And now the magnate who had played Providence slumbered in the family vault. He had passed away in the spring, full of years and honors, leaving Cliffe some money. The path was clear. As for the escapade in the Balkans, Geoffrey was, of course, tired of it. A sensational book, hurried out to meet the public appetite for horrors—and the pursuance of his intrigue with Lady Kitty Ashe—Mary was calmly certain that these were now his objects. He was, no doubt, writing his book and meeting Kitty where he could. Ashe would soon have to go home. And then! As if that girl Margaret French could stop it!

Well, William had only got his deserts! But as her thoughts passed from Kitty or Cliffe to William Ashe, their quality changed. Hatred and bitterness, scorn or wounded vanity, passed into something gentler. She fell into recollections of Ashe as he had appeared on that bygone afternoon in May when he came back triumphant from his election, with the world before him. If he had never seen Kitty Bristol!—

"I should have made him a good wife," she said to herself. "*I* should have known how to be proud of him."

And there emerged also the tragic consciousness that if the fates had given him to her she might have been another woman—taught by happiness, by love, by motherhood.

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It was that little, heartless creature who had snatched them both from her—William and Geoffrey Cliffe—the higher and the lower—the man who might have ennobled her—and the man, half charlatan, half genius, whom she might have served and raised, by her fortune and her abilities. Her life might have been so full, so interesting! And it was Kitty that had made it flat, and cold, and futureless.

Poor William! Had he really liked her, in those boy-and-girl days? She dreamed over their old cousinly relations—over the presents he had sometimes given her.

Then a thought, like a burning arrow, pierced her. Her hands locked, straining one against the other. If this intrigue were indeed renewed—if Geoffrey succeeded in tempting Kitty from her husband—why then —then—

She shivered before the images that were passing through her mind, and, rising, she put away her letters and rang for the waiter, to order dinner.

"Where shall we go?" said Kitty, languidly, putting down the French novel she was reading.

"Mr. Ashe suggested San Lazzaro." Margaret looked up from her writing as Kitty moved towards her. "The rain seems to have all cleared off."

"Well, I'm sure it doesn't matter where," said Kitty, and was turning away; but Margaret caught her hand and caressed it.

"Naughty Kitty! why this sea air can't put some more color into your cheeks I don't understand."

"I'm *not* pale!" cried Kitty, pouting. "Margaret, you do croak about me so! If you say any more I'll go

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and rouge till you'll be ashamed to go out with me—there! Where's William?"

William opened the door as she spoke, the *Gazetta di Venezia* in one hand and a telegram in the other.

"Something for you, darling," he said, holding it out to Kitty. "Shall I open it?"

"Oh no!" said Kitty, hastily. "Give it me. It's from my Paris woman."

"Ah—ha!" laughed Ashe. "Some extravagance you want to keep to yourself, I'll be bound. I've a good mind to see!"

And he teasingly held it up above her head. But she gave a little jump, caught it, and ran off with it to her room.

"Much regret impossible stop publication. Fifty copies distributed already. Writing."

She dropped speechless on the edge of her bed, the crumpled telegram in her hand. The minutes passed.

"When will you be ready?" said Ashe, tapping at the door.

"Is the gondola there?"

"Waiting at the steps."

"Five minutes!" Ashe departed. She rose, tore the telegram into little bits, and began with deliberation to put on her mantle and hat.

"You've got to go through with it," she said to the white face in the glass, and she straightened her small shoulders defiantly.

They were bound for the Armenian convent. It was a misty day, with shafts of light on the lagoon. The

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storm had passed, but the water was still rough, and the clouds seemed to be withdrawing their forces only to marshal them again with the darkness. A day of sudden bursts of watery light, of bands of purple distance struck into enchanting beauty by the red or orange of a sail, of a wild salt breath in air that seemed to be still suffused with spray. The Alps were hidden; but what sun there was played faintly on the Euganean hills.

"I say, Margaret, at last she does us some credit!" said Ashe, pointing to his wife.

Margaret started. Was it rouge?—or was it the strong air? Kitty's languor had entirely disappeared; she was more cheerful and more talkative than she had been at any time since their arrival. She chattered about the current scandals of Venice — the mysterious contessa who lived in the palace opposite their own, and only went out, in deep mourning, at night, because she had been the love of a Russian grand-duke, and the grand-duke was dead; of the Carlist pretender and his wife, who had been very popular in Venice until they took it into their heads to require royal honors, and Venice, taking time to think, had lazily decided the game was not worth the candle—so now the sulky pair went about alone in a fine gondola, turning glassy eyes on their former acquaintance; of the needy marchese who had sold a Titian to the Louvre, and had then found himself boycotted by all his kinsfolk in Venice who were not needy and had no Titians to sell—all these tales Kitty reeled out at length till the handsome gondoliers marvelled at the little lady's vivacity and the queer brightness of her eyes.

"Gracious, Kitty, where do you get all these stories

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from?" cried Ashe, when the chatter paused for a moment.

He looked at her with delight, rejoicing in her gayety, the slight touches of white which to-day for the first time relieved the sombreness of her dress, the return of her color. And Margaret wondered again how much of it was rouge.

At the Armenian convent a handsome young monk took charge of them. As George Sand and Lamennais had done before them, they looked at the printing-press, the garden, the cloister, the church; they marvelled lazily at the cleanliness and brightness of the place; and finally they climbed to the library and museum, and the room close by where Byron played at grammar-making. In this room Ashe fell suddenly into a political talk with the young monk, who was an ardent and patriotic son of the most unfortunate of nations, and they passed out and down the stairs, followed by Margaret French, not noticing that Kitty had lingered behind.

Kitty stood idly by the window of Byron's room, thinking restlessly of verses that were not Byron's, though there was in them, clothed in forms of the new age, the spirit of Byronic passion, and more than a touch of Byronic affectation—thinking also of the morning's telegram. Supposing Darrell's prophecy, which had seemed to her so absurd, came true, that the book did William harm, not good—that he ceased to love her—that he cast her off? . . .

. . . A plash of water outside, and a voice giving directions. From the lagoon towards Malamocco a gondola approached. A gentleman and lady were seated in it. The lady—a very handsome Italian, with a

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loud laugh and brilliant eyes—carried a scarlet parasol. Kitty gave a stifled cry as she drew back. She fled out of the room and overtook the other two.

"May we go back into the garden a little?" she said, hurriedly, to the monk who was talking to William. "I should like to see the view towards Venice."

William held up a watch, to show that there was but just time to get back to the Piazza for lunch. Kitty persisted, and the monk, understanding what the impetuous young lady wished, good-naturedly turned to obey her.

"We must be *very* quick!" said Kitty. "Take us please, to the edge, beyond the trees."

And she herself hurried through the garden to its farther side, where it was bounded by the lagoon.

The others followed her, rather puzzled by her caprice.

"Not much to be seen, darling!" said Ashe, as they reached the water—"and I think this good man wants to get rid of us!"

And, indeed, the monk was looking backward across the intervening trees at a party which had just entered the garden.

"Ah, they have found another brother!" he said, politely, and he began to point out to Kitty the various landmarks visible, the arsenal, the two asylums, San Pietro di Castello.

The new-comers just glanced at the garden apparently, as the Ashes had done on arrival, and promptly followed their guide back into the convent.

Kitty asked a few more questions, then led the way in a hasty return to the garden door, the entrance-hall,

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and the steps where their gondola was waiting. Nothing was to be seen of the second party. They had passed on into the cloisters.

Animation, oddity, inconsequence, all these things Margaret observed in Kitty during luncheon in a restaurant of the Merceria, and various incidents connected with it; animation above all. The Ashes fell in with acquaintance — a fashionable and harassed mother, on the fringe of the Archangels, accompanied by two daughters, one pretty and one plain, and sore pressed by their demands, real or supposed. The parents were not rich, but the girls had to be dressed, taken abroad, produced at country-houses, at Ascot, and the opera, like all other girls. The eldest girl, a considerable beauty, was an accomplished egotist at nineteen, and regarded her mother as a rather inefficient *dame de compagnie*. Kitty understood this young lady perfectly, and after luncheon, over her cigarette, her little, sharp, probing questions gave the beauty twenty minutes' annoyance. Then appeared a young man, ill-dressed, red-haired, and shy. Carelessly as he greeted the mother and daughters, his entrance, however, transformed them. The mother forgot fatigue; the beauty ceased to yawn; the younger girl, who had been making surreptitious notes of Kitty's costume in the last leaf of her guide-book, developed a charming gush. He was the owner of the Magellan estates and the historic Magellan Castle; a professed hater of "absurd womankind," and, in general, a hunted and self-conscious person. Kitty gave him one finger, looked him up and down, asked him whether he was yet engaged, and when

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he laughed an embarrassed "No," told him that he would certainly die in the arms of the Magellan housekeeper.

This got a smile out of him. He sat down beside her, and the two laughed and talked with a freedom which presently drew the attention of the neighboring tables, and made Ashe uncomfortable. He rose, paid the bill, and succeeded in carrying the whole party off to the Piazza in search of coffee. But here again Kitty's extravagances, the provocation of her light loveliness, as she sat toying with a fresh cigarette and "chaffing" Lord Magellan, drew a disagreeable amount of notice from the Italians passing by.

"Mother, let's go!" said the angry beauty, imperiously, in her mother's ear. "I don't like to be seen with Lady Kitty! She's impossible!"

And with cold farewells the three ladies departed. Then Kitty sprang up and threw away her cigarette.

"How those girls bully their mother!" she said, with scorn. "However, it serves her right. I'm sure she bullied hers. Well, now we must go and do something. Ta-ta!"

Lord Magellan, to whom she offered another casual finger, wanted to know why he was dismissed. If they were going sight-seeing, might he not come with them?"

"Oh no!" said Kitty, calmly. "Sight-seeing with people you don't really know is too trying to the temper. Even with one's best friend it's risky."

"Where are you? May I call?" said the young man.

"We're always out," was Kitty's careless reply. "But—"

She considered—

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"Would you like to see the Palazzo Vercelli?"

"That magnificent place on the Grand Canal? Very much."

"Meet me there to-morrow afternoon," said Kitty. "Four o'clock."

"Delighted!" said Lord Magellan, making a note on his shirt-cuff. "And who lives there?"

"My mother," said Kitty, abruptly, and walked away.

Ashe followed her in discomfort. This young man was the son of a certain Lady Magellan, an intimate friend of Lady Tranmore's—one of the noblest women of her generation, pure, high-minded, spiritual, to whom neither an ugly word nor thought was possible. It annoyed him that either he or Kitty should be introducing *her* son to Madame d'Estrées.

It was really tiresome of Kitty! Rich young men with characters yet indeterminate were not to be lightly brought in contact with Madame d'Estrées. Kitty could not be ignorant of it—poor child! It had been one of her reckless strokes, and Ashe was conscious of a sharp annoyance.

However, he said nothing. He followed his companions from church to church, till pictures became an abomination to him. Then he pleaded letters, and went to the club.

"Will you call on maman to-morrow?" said Kitty, as he turned away, looking at him a little askance.

She knew that he had disapproved of her invitation to Lord Magellan. Why had she given it? She didn't know. There seemed to be a kind of revived mischief and fever in the blood, driving her to these foolish and ill-considered things.

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Ashe met her question with a shake of the head and the remark, in a decided tone, that he should be too busy.

Privately he thought it a piece of impertinence that Madame d'Estrées should expect either Kitty or himself to appear in her drawing-room at all. That this implied a complete transformation of his earlier attitude he was well aware; he accepted it with a curious philosophy. When he and Kitty first met he had never troubled his head about such things. If a woman amused or interested him in society, so long as his taste was satisfied she might have as much or as little character as she pleased. It stirred his mocking sense of English hypocrisy that the point should be even raised. But now—how can any individual, he asked himself, with political work to do, affect to despise the opinions and prejudices of society? A politician with great reforms to put through will make no friction round him that he can avoid—unless he is a fool. It weighed sorely, therefore, on his present mind that Madame d'Estrées was in Venice—that she was a person of blemished repute—that he must be and was ashamed of her. It would have been altogether out of consonance with his character to put any obstacle in the way of Kitty's seeing her mother. But he chafed as he had never yet chafed under the humiliation of his relationship to the notorious Margaret Fitzgerald of the forties, who had been old Blackwater's *chère amie* before she married him, and, as Lady Blackwater, had sacrificed her innocent and defenceless step-daughter to one of her own lovers, in order to secure for him the step-daughter's fortune—black and dastardly deed!

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Was it all part of the general growth and concentration that any shrewd observer might have read in William Ashe?—the pressure—enormous, unseen—of the traditional English ideals, English standards, asserting itself at last in a brilliant and paradoxical nature? It had been so—conspicuously—in the case of one of his political predecessors. Lord Melbourne had begun his career as a person of idle habits and imprudent adventures, much given to coarse conversation, and unable to say the simplest thing without an oath. He ended it as the man of scrupulous dignity, tact, and delicacy, who moulded the innocent youth of a girl-queen, to his own lasting honor and England's gratitude. In ways less striking, the same influence of vast responsibilities was perhaps acting upon William Ashe. It had already made him a sterner, tougher, and—no doubt—a greater man.

The defection of William only left Kitty, it seemed, still more greedy of things to see and do. Innumerable sacristans opened all possible doors and unveiled all possible pictures. Bellini succeeded Tintoret, and Carpaccio Bellini. The two sable gondoliers wore themselves out in Kitty's service, and Margaret's kind, round face grew more and more puzzled and distressed. And whence this strange impression that the whole experience was a *flight* on Kitty's part?—or, rather, that throughout it she was always eagerly expecting, or eagerly escaping from some unknown, unseen pursuer? A glance behind her—a start—a sudden shivering gesture in the shadows of dark churches—these things suggested it, till Margaret herself was caught by the same

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suppressed excitement that seemed to be alive in Kitty. Did it all point merely to some mental state—to the nervous effects of her illness and her loss?

When they reached home about five o'clock, Kitty was naturally tired out. Margaret put her on the sofa, gave her tea, and tended her, hoping that she might drop asleep before dinner. But just as tea was over, and Kitty was lying curled up, silent and white, with that brooding look which kept Margaret's anxiety about her constantly alive, there was a sudden sound of voices in the anteroom outside.

"Margaret!" cried Kitty, starting up in dismay—"say I'm not at home."

Too late! Their smiling Italian housemaid threw the door open, with the air of one bringing good-fortune. And behind her appeared a tall lady, and an old gentleman hat in hand.

"May we come in, Kitty?" said Mary Lyster, advancing. "Cousin Elizabeth told us you were here."

Kitty had sprung up. The disorder of her fair hair, her white cheeks, and the ghostly thinness of her small, black-robed form drew the curious eyes of Sir Richard. And the oddness of her manner as she greeted them only confirmed the old man's prejudice against her.

However, greeted they were, in some sort of fashion; and Miss French gave them tea. She kept Sir Richard entertained, while Kitty and Mary conversed. They talked perfunctorily of ordinary topics—Venice, its sights, its hotels, and the people staying in them—of Lady Tranmore and various Ashe relations. Meanwhile the inmost thought of each was busy with the other,

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Kitty studied the lines of Mary's face and the fashion of her dress.

"She looks much older. And she's not enjoying her life a bit. That's my fault. I spoiled all her chances with Geoffrey—and she knows it. She *hates* me. Quite right, too."

"Oh, you mean that nonsensical thing last night?" Sir Richard was saying to Margaret French. "Oh no, I didn't go. But Mary, of course, thought she must go. Somebody invited her."

Kitty started.

"You were at the serenata?" she said to Mary.

"Yes, I went with a party from the hotel."

Kitty looked at her. A sudden flush had touched her pale cheeks, and she could not conceal the trembling of her hands.

"That was marvellous, that light on the Salute, wasn't it?"

"Wonderful!—and on the water, too. I saw two or three people I knew—just caught their faces for a second."

"Did you?" said Kitty. And thoughts ran fast through her head. "Did she see Geoffrey?—and does she mean me to understand that she did? How she detests me! If she did see him, of course she supposes that I know all about it, and that he's here for me. Why don't I ask her, straight out, whether she saw him, and make her understand that I don't care twopence?—that she's welcome to him—as far as I'm concerned?"

But some hidden feeling tied her tongue. Mary continued to talk about the serenata, and Kitty was presently conscious that her every word and gesture

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in reply was closely watched. "Yes, yes, she saw him. Perhaps she'll tell William—or write home to mother?"

And in her excitement she began to chatter fast and loudly, mostly to Sir Richard—repeating some of the Venice tales she had told in the gondola—with much inconsequence and extravagance. The old man listened, his hands on his stick, his eyes on the ground, the expression on his strong mouth hostile or sarcastic. It was a relief to everybody when Ashe's step was heard stumbling up the dark stairs, and the door opened on his friendly and courteous presence.

"Why, Polly!—and Cousin Richard! I wondered where you had hidden yourselves."

Mary's bright, involuntary smile transformed her. Ashe sat down beside her, and they were soon deep in all sorts of gossip—relations, acquaintance, politics, and what not. All Mary's stiffness disappeared. She became the elegant, agreeable woman, of whom dinner-parties were glad. Ashe plunged into the pleasant malice of her talk, which ranged through the good and evil fortunes—mostly the latter—of half his acquaintance; discussed the debts, the love-affairs, and the follies of his political colleagues or Parliamentary foes; how the Foreign Secretary had been getting on at Balmoral—how so-and-so had been ruined at the Derby and restored to sanity and solvency by the Oaks—how Lady Parham, at Hatfield, had been made to know her place by the French Ambassador—and the like; passing thereby a charming half-hour.

Meanwhile Kitty, Margaret French, and Sir Richard kept up intermittent remarks, pausing at every other

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phrase to gather the crumbs that fell from the table of the other two.

Kitty was very weary, and a dead weight had fallen on her spirits. If Sir Richard had thought her bad form ten minutes before, his unspoken mind now declared her stupid. Meanwhile Kitty was saying to herself, as she watched her husband and Mary:

"I used to amuse William just as well—last year!"

When the door closed on them, Kitty fell back on her cushions with an "ouf!" of relief. William came back in a few minutes from showing the visitors the back way to their hotel, and stood beside his wife with an anxious face.

"They were too much for you, darling. They stayed too long."

"How you and Mary chattered!" said Kitty, with a little pout. But at the same moment she slipped an appealing hand into his.

Ashe clasped the hand, and laughed.

"I always told you she was an excellent gossip."

Sir Richard and Mary pursued their way through the narrow *calles* that led to the Piazza. Sir Richard was expatiating on Ashe's folly in marrying such a wife.

"She looks like an actress!—and as to her conversation, she began by telling me outrageous stories and ended by not having a word to say about anything. The bad blood of the Bristols, it seems to me, without their brains."

"Oh no, papa! Kitty is very clever. You haven't heard her recite. She was tired to-night."

"Well, I don't want to flatter you, my dear!" said the

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old man, testily, "but I thought it was pathetic—the way in which Ashe enjoyed your conversation. It showed he didn't get much of it at home."

Mary smiled uncertainly. Her whole nature was still aglow from that contact with Ashe's delightful personality. After months of depression and humiliation, her success with him had somehow restored those illusions on which cheerfulness depends.

How ill Kitty looked — and how conscious! Mary was impetuously certain that Kitty had betrayed her knowledge of Cliffe's presence in Venice; and equally certain that William knew nothing. Poor William!

Well, what can you expect of such a temperament—such a race? Mary's thoughts travelled confusedly towards—and through—some big and dreadful catastrophe.

And then? After it?

It seemed to her that she was once more in the Park Lane drawing-room; the familiar Morris papers and Burne-Jones drawings surrounded her; and she and Elizabeth Tranmore sat, hand in hand, talking of William—a William once more free, after much folly and suffering, to reconstruct his life. . . .

"Here we are," said Sir Richard Lyster, moving down a dark passage towards the brightly lit doorway of their hotel.

With a start—as of one taken red-handed—Mary awoke from her dream.

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XX

MADAME D'ESTRÉES and her friend, Donna Laura, occupied the *mezzanin* of the vast Vercelli palace. The palace itself belonged to the head of the Vercelli family. It was a magnificent erection of the late seventeenth century, at this moment half furnished, dilapidated, and forsaken. But the *entresol* on the eastern side of the *cortile* was in good condition, and comfortably fitted up for the occasional use of the Principe. As he was wintering in Paris, he had let his rooms at an ordinary commercial rent to his kinswoman, Donna Laura. She, a soured and melancholy woman, unmarried in a Latin society which has small use or kindness for spinsters, had seized on Marguerite d'Estrées—whose acquaintance she had made in a Mont d'Or hotel—and was now keeping her like a caged canary that sings for its food.

Madame d'Estrées was quite willing. So long as she had a sofa on which to sit enthroned, a sufficiency of new gowns, a maid, cigarettes, breakfast in bed, and a supply of French novels, she appeared the most harmless and engaging of mortals. Her youth had been cruel, disorderly, and vicious. It had lasted long; but now, when middle age stood at last confessed, she was lapsing, it seemed, into amiability and good behavior. She was, indeed, fast forgetting her own history, and soon the recital of it would surprise no one so much as herself.

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It was five o'clock. Madame d'Estrées had just established herself in the silk-panelled drawing-room of Donna Laura's apartment, expectant of visitors, and, in particular, of her daughter.

In begging Kitty to come on this particular afternoon, she had not thought fit to mention that it would be Donna Laura's "day." Had she done so, Kitty, in consideration of her mourning, would perhaps have cried off. Whereas, really—poor, dear child!—what she wanted was distraction and amusement.

And what Madame d'Estrées wanted was the presence beside her, in public, of Lady Kitty Ashe. Kitty had already visited her mother privately, and had explored the antiquities of the Vercelli palace. But Madame d'Estrées was now intent on something more and different.

For in the four years which had now elapsed since the Ashe's marriage this lively lady had known adversity. She had been forced to leave London, as we have seen, by the pressure of certain facts in her past history so ancient and far removed when their true punishment began that she no doubt felt it highly unjust that she should be punished for them at all. Her London debts had swallowed up what then remained to her of fortune; and, afterwards, the allowance from the Ashes was all she had to depend on. Banished to Paris, she fell into a lower stratum of life, at a moment when her faithful and mysterious friend, Markham Warington, was held in Scotland by the first painful symptoms of his sister's last illness, and could do but little for her. She had, in fact, known the sordid shifts and straits of poverty, though the smallest moral

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effort would have saved her from them. She had kept disreputable company, she had been miserable, and base; and although shame is not easy to persons of her temperament, it may perhaps be said that she was ashamed of this period of her existence. Appeals to the Ashes yielded less and less, and Warington seemed to have forsaken her. She awoke at last to a panic-stricken fear of darker possibilities and more real suffering than any she had yet known, and under the stress of this fear she collapsed physically, writing both to Warington and to the Ashes in a tone of mingled reproach and despair.

The Ashes sent money, and, though Kitty was at the moment not fit to travel, prepared to come. Warington, who had just closed the eyes of his sister, went at once. He was now the last of his family, without any ties that he could not lawfully break. Within two days of his arrival in Paris, Madame d'Estrées had promised to marry him in three months, to break off all her Paris associations, and to give her life henceforward into his somewhat stern hands. The visit to Venice was part of the price that he had had to pay for her decision. Marguerite pleaded, with a shudder, that she must have a little amusement before she went to live in Dumfriesshire; and he had been obliged to acquiesce in her arrangement with Donna Laura—stipulating only that he should be their escort and guardian.

What had moved him to such an act? His reasons can only be guessed at. Warington was a man of religion, a Calvinist by education and inheritance, and of a silent and dreamy temperament. He had been intimate with very few women in his life. His sister had

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been a second mother to him, and both of them had been the guardians of their younger brother. When this adored brother fell shot through the lungs in the hopeless defence of Lady Blackwater's reputation, it would have been natural enough that Markham should hate the woman who had been the occasion of such a calamity. The sister, a pious and devoted Christian, had indeed hated her, properly and duly, thenceforward. Markham, on the contrary, accepted his brother's last commission without reluctance. In this matter at least Lady Blackwater had not been directly to blame; his mind acquitted her; and her soft, distressed beauty touched his heart. Before he knew where he was she had made an impression upon him that was to be lifelong.

Then gradually he awoke to a full knowledge of her character. He suffered, but otherwise it made no difference. Finding it was then impossible to persuade her to marry him, he watched over her as best he could for some years, passing through phases of alternate hope and disgust. His sister's affection for him was clouded by his strange relation to the Jezebel who in her opinion had destroyed their brother. He could not help it; he could only do his best to meet both claims upon him. During her lingering passage to the grave, his sister had nearly severed him from Marguerite d'Estrées. She died, however, just in time, and now here he was in Venice, passing through what seemed to him one of the anterooms of life, leading to no very radiant beyond. But, radiant or no, his path lay thither. And at the same time he saw that although Marguerite felt him to be her only refuge from poverty and disgrace, she was

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painfully afraid of him, and afraid of the life into which he was leading her.

The first guest of the afternoon proved to be Louis Harman, the painter and dilettante, who had been in former days one of the *habitués* of the house in St. James's Place. This perfectly correct yet tolerant gentleman was wintering in Venice in order to copy the Carpaccios in San Giorgio dei Schiavoni. His copies were not good, but they were all promised to artistic fair ladies, and the days which the painter spent upon them were happy and harmless.

He came in gayly, delighted to see Madame d'Estrées in flourishing circumstances again, delivered apparently from the abyss into which he had found her sliding on the occasion of various chance visits of his own to Paris. Warington's doing, apparently—queer fellow!

"Well!—I saw Lady Kitty in the Piazza this afternoon," he said, as he sat down beside his hostess. Donna Laura had not yet appeared. "Very thin and fragile! But, by Jove! how these English beauties hold their own."

"Irish, if you please," said Madame d'Estrées, smiling.

Harman bowed to her correction, admiring at the same time both the toilette and the good looks of his companion. Dropping his voice, he asked, with a gingerly and sympathetic air, whether all was now well with the Ashe ménage. He had been sorry to hear certain gossip of the year before.

Madame d'Estrées laughed. Yes, she understood that Kitty had behaved like a little goose with that *poseur* Cliffe. But that was all over—long ago.

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"Why, the silly child has everything she wants! William is devoted to her—and it can't be long before he succeeds."

"No need to go trifling with poets," said Harman, smiling. "By-the-way, do you know that Geoffrey Cliffe is in Venice?"

Madame d'Estrées opened her eyes. "Est-il possible? Oh! but Kitty has forgotten all about him."

"Of course," said Harman. "I am told he has been seen with the Ricci."

Madame d'Estrées raised her shoulders this time in addition to her eyes. Then her face clouded.

"I believe," she said, slowly, "that woman may come here this afternoon."

"Is she a friend of yours?" Harman's tone expressed his surprise.

"I knew her in Paris," said Madame d'Estrées, with some hesitation, "when she was a student at the Conservatoire. She and I had some common acquaintance. And now—frankly, I daren't offend her. She has the most appalling temper!—and she sticks at nothing."

Harman wondered what the exact truth of this might be, but did not inquire. And as guests—including Colonel Warington—began to arrive, and Donna Laura appeared and began to dispense tea, the *tête-à-tête* was interrupted.

Donna Laura's *salon* was soon well filled, and Harman watched the gathering with curiosity. As far as it concerned Madame d'Estrées—and she was clearly the main attraction which had brought it together—it represented, he saw, a phase of social recovery. A few

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prominent Englishmen, passing through Venice, came in without their wives, making perfunctory excuse for the absence of these ladies. But the cosmopolitans of all kinds, who crowded in—Anglo-Italians, foreign diplomats, travellers of many sorts, and a few restless Venetians, bearing the great names of old, to whom their own Venice was little more than a place of occasional sojourn—made satisfactory amends for these persons of too long memories. In all these travellers' towns, Venice, Rome, and Florence, there is indeed a society, and a very agreeable society, which is wholly irresponsible, and asks few or no questions. The elements of it meet as strangers, and as strangers they mostly part. But between the meeting and the parting there lies a moment, all the gayer, perhaps, because of its social uncertainty and freedom.

Madame d'Estrées was profiting by it to the full. She was in excellent spirits and talk; bright-rose carnations shone in the bosom of her dress; one white arm, bared to the elbow, lay stretched carelessly on the fine cut-velvet which covered the gilt sofa—part of a suite of Venetian Louis Quinze, clumsily gorgeous—on which she sat; the other hand pulled the ears of a toy spaniel. On the ceiling above her, Tiepolo had painted a headlong group of sensuous forms, alive with vulgar movement and passion; the *putti* and the goddesses, peering through aërial balustrades, looked down complacently on Madame d'Estrées.

Meanwhile there stood behind her — a silent, distinguished figure—the man of whom Harman saw that she was always nervously and sometimes timidly conscious. Harman had been reading Molière's *Don Juan*.

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The sentinel figure of Warington mingled in his imagination with the statue of the Commander.

Or, again, he was tickled by a vision of Madame d'Estrées grown old, living in a Scotch house, turreted and severe, tended by servants of the "Auld Licht," or shivering under a faithful minister on Sundays. Had she any idea of the sort of fold towards which Warington—at once Covenanter and man of the world—was carrying his lost sheep?

The sheep, however, was still gambolling at large. Occasionally a guest appeared who proved it. For instance, at a certain tumultuous entrance, billowing skirts, vast hat, and high-pitched voice all combining in the effect, Madame d'Estrées flushed violently, and Warington's stiffness redoubled. On the threshold stood the young actress, Mademoiselle Ricci, a Marseillaise, half French, half Italian, who was at the moment the talk of Venice. Why, would take too long to tell. It was by no means mostly due to her talent, which, however, was displayed at the Apollo theatre two or three times a week, and was no doubt considerable. She was a flamboyant lady, with astonishing black eyes, a too transparent white dress, over which was slung a small black mantilla, a scarlet hat and parasol, and a startling fan of the same color. Both before and after her greeting of Madame d'Estrées—whom she called her "chérie" and her "belle Marguerite"—she created a whirlwind in the *salon*. She was noisy, rude, and false; it could only be said on the other side that she was handsome—for those who admired the kind ot thing; and famous—more or less. The intimacy of the party was broken up by her, for wherever she was she

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brought uproar, and it was impossible to forget her. And this uneasy attention which she compelled was at its height when the door was once more thrown open for the entrance of Lady Kitty Ashe.

"Ah, my darling Kitty!" cried Madame d'Estrées, rising in a soft enthusiasm.

Kitty came in slowly, holding herself very erect, a delicate and distinguished figure, in her deep mourning. She frowned as she saw the crowd in the room.

"I'll come another time!" she said, hastily, to her mother, beginning to retreat.

"Oh, Kitty!" cried Madame d'Estrées, in distress, holding her fast.

At that moment Harman, who was watching them both with keenness, saw that Kitty had perceived Mademoiselle Ricci. The actress had paused in her chatter to stare at the new-comer. She sat fronting the entrance, her head insolently thrown back, knees crossed, a cigarette poised in the plump and dimpled hand.

A start ran through Kitty's small person. She allowed her mother to lead her in and introduce her to Donna Laura.

"Ah-ha, my lady!" said Harman, to himself. "Are you, perhaps, interested in the Ricci? Is it possible even that you have seen her before?"

Kitty, however, betrayed herself to no one else. To other people it was only evident that she did not mean to be introduced to the actress. She pointedly and sharply avoided it. This was interpreted as aristocratic *hauteur*, and did her no harm. On the contrary, she was soon chattering French with a group of diplomats, and the centre of the most animated group in the room.

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"THE ACTRESS PAUSED TO STARE AT LADY KITTY"

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All the new-comers who could attached themselves to it, and the actress found herself presently almost deserted. She put up her eyeglass, studied Kitty impertinently, and asked a man sitting near her for the name of the strange lady.

"Isn't she lovely, my little Kitty!" said Madame d'Estrées, in the ears of a Bavarian baron, who was also much occupied in staring at the small beauty in black. "I may say it, though I am her mother. And my son-in-law, too. Have you seen him? Such a handsome fellow!—and *such* a dear!—so kind to me. They *say*, you know, that he will be Prime Minister."

The baron bowed, ironically, and inquired who the gentleman might be. He had not caught Kitty's name, and Madame d'Estrées had been for some time labelled in his mind as something very near to an adventuress.

Madame d'Estrées eagerly explained, and he bowed again, with a difference. He was a man of great intelligence, acquainted with English politics. So that was *really* the wife of the man to whose personality and future the London correspondent of the *Allgemeine Zeitung* had within the preceding week devoted a particularly interesting article, which he had read with attention. His estimate of Madame d'Estrées' place in the world altered at once. Yet it was strange that she—or, rather, Donna Laura—should admit such a person as Mademoiselle Ricci to their *salon*.

The mother, indeed, that afternoon had much reason to be socially grateful to the daughter. Curious contrast with the days when Kitty had been the mere troublesome appendage of her mother's life! It was clear to Marguerite d'Estrées now that if she was to ac-

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cept restraint and virtuous living, if she was to submit to this marriage she dreaded, yet saw no way to escape, her best link with the gay world in the future might well be through the Ashes. Kitty could do a great deal for her; let her cultivate Kitty; and begin, perhaps, by convincing William Ashe on this present occasion that for once she was not going to ask him for money.

In the height of the party, Lord Magellan appeared. Madame d'Estrées at first looked at him with bewilderment, till Kitty, shaking herself free, came hastily forward to introduce him. At the name the mother's face flashed into smiles. The ramifications of two or three aristocracies represented the only subject she might be said to know. Dear Kitty!

Lord Magellan, after Madame d'Estrées had talked to him about his family in a few light and skilful phrases, which suggested knowledge, while avoiding flattery, was introduced to the Bavarian baron and a French naval officer. But he was not interesting to them, nor they to him; Kitty was surrounded and unapproachable; and a flood of new arrivals distracted Madame d'Estrées' attention. The Ricci, who had noticed the restrained *empressement* of his reception, pounced on the young man, taming her ways and gestures to what she supposed to be his English prudery, and produced an immediate effect upon him. Lord Magellan, who was only dumb with English marriageable girls, allowed himself to be amused, and threw himself into a low chair by the actress—a capture apparently for the afternoon.

Louis Harman was sitting behind Kitty, a little to her right. He saw her watching the actress and her companion; noticed a compression of the lip, a flash in the

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eye. She sprang up, said she must go home, and practically dissolved the party.

Mademoiselle Ricci, who had also risen, proposed to Lord Magellan that she should take him in her gondola to the shop of a famous dealer on the Canal.

"Thank you very much," said Lord Magellan, irresolute, and he looked at Kitty. The look apparently decided him, for he immediately added that he had unfortunately an engagement in the opposite direction. The actress angrily drew herself up, and proposed a later appointment. Then Kitty carelessly intervened.

"Do you remember that you promised to see me home?" she said to the young man. "Don't if it bores you!"

Lord Magellan eagerly protested. Kitty moved away, and he followed her.

"Chère madame, will you present me to your daughter?" said the Ricci, in an unnecessarily loud voice.

Madame d'Estrées, with a flurried gesture, touched Kitty on the arm.

"Kitty, Mademoiselle Ricci."

Kitty took no notice. Madame d'Estrées said, quickly, in a low, imploring voice:

"Please, dear Kitty. I'll explain."

Kitty turned abruptly, looked at her mother, and at the woman to whom she was to be introduced.

"Ah! comme elle est charmante!" cried the actress, with an inflection of irony in her strident voice. "Miladi, il faut absolument que nous nous connaissions. Je connais votre chère mère depuis si longtemps! À Paris, l'hiver passé c'était une amitié des plus tendres!"

The nasal drag she gave to the words was partly

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natural, partly insolent. Madame d'Estrées bit her lip.

"Oui?" said Kitty, indifferently. "Je n'en avais jamais entendu parler."

Her brilliant eyes studied the woman before her. "She has some hold on maman," she said to herself, in disgust. "She knows of something shady that maman has done." Then another thought stung her; and with the most indifferent bow, triumphing in the evident offence that she was giving, she turned to Lord Magellan.

"You'd like to see the Palazzo?"

Warington at once offered himself as a guide.

But Kitty declared she knew the way, would just show Lord Magellan the *piano nobile*, dismiss him at the grand staircase, and return. Lord Magellan made his farewells.

As Kitty passed through the door of the *salon*, while the young man held back the velvet *portière* which hung over it, she was aware that Mademoiselle Ricci was watching her. The Marseillaise was leaning heavily on a *fauteuil*, supported by a hand behind her. A slow, disdainful smile played about her lips, some evil threatening thought expressed itself through every feature of her rounded, coarsened beauty. Kitty's sharp look met hers, and the curtain dropped.

"Don't, please, let that woman take you anywhere—to see anything!" said Kitty, with energy, to her companion, as they walked through the rooms of the *mezzanino*.

Lord Magellan laughed. "What's the matter with her?"

"Oh, nothing!" said Kitty, impatiently, "except that

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she's wicked—and common—and a snake—and your mother would have a fit if she knew you had anything to do with her."

The red-haired youth looked grave.

"Thank you, Lady Kitty," he said, quietly. "I'll take your advice."

"Oh, I say, what a nice boy you are!" cried Kitty, impulsively, laying a hand a moment on his shoulder. And then, as though his filial instinct had awakened hers, she added, with hasty falsehood: "Maman, of course, knows nothing about her. That was just bluff what she said. But Donna Laura oughtn't to ask such people. There—that's the way."

And she pointed to a small staircase in the wall, whereof the trap-door at the top was open. They climbed it, and found themselves at once in one of the great rooms of the *piano nobile*, to which this quick and easy access from the inhabited *entresol* had been but recently contrived.

"What a marvellous place!" cried Lord Magellan, looking round him.

They were in the principal apartment of the famous Vercelli palace, a legacy from one of those classical architects whose work may be seen in the late seventeenth-century buildings of Venice. The rooms, enormously high, panelled here and there in tattered velvets and brocades, or frescoed in fast-fading scenes of old Venetian life, stretched in bewildering succession on either side of a central passage or broad corridor, all of them leading at last on the northern side to a vast hall painted in architectural perspective by the pupils of Tiepolo, and overarched by a ceiling in which the master himself

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had massed a multitude of forms equal to Rubens in variety and facility of design, expressed in a thin trenchancy of style. Figures recalling the ancient triumphs and possessions of Venice, in days when she sat dishonored and despoiled, crowded the coved roof, the painted cornices and pediments. Gayly colored birds hovered in blue skies; philosophers and poets in grisaille made a strange background for large-limbed beauties couched on roses, or young warriors amid trophies of shining arms; and while all this garrulous commonplace lived and breathed above, the walls below, cold in color and academic in treatment, maintained as best they could the dignity of the vast place, thus given up to one of the greatest of artists and emptiest of minds.

On the floor of this magnificent hall stood a few old and broken chairs. But the candelabra of glass and ormolu, hanging from the ceiling, were very nearly of the date of the palace, and superb. Meanwhile, through a faded taffeta of a golden-brown shade, the afternoon light from the high windows to the southwest poured into the stately room.

"How it dwarfs us!" said Lord Magellan, looking at his companion. "One feels the merest pygmy! From the age of decadence indeed!" He glanced at the guidebook in his hand. "Good Heavens!—if this was their decay, what was their bloom?"

"Yes—it's big—and jolly. I like it," said Kitty, absently. Then she recollected herself. "This is your way out. Federigo!" she called to an old man, the *custode* of the palace, who appeared at the magnificent door leading to the grand staircase.

"Commanda, eccellenza!" The old man, bent and

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feeble, approached. He carried a watering-pot wherewith he was about to minister to some straggling flowers in the windows fronting the Grand Canal. A thin cat rubbed itself against his legs. As he stood in his shabbiness under the high, carved door, the only permanent denizen of the building, he seemed an embodiment of the old shrunken Venetian life, still haunting a city it was no longer strong enough to use.

"Will you show this signor the way out?" said Kitty, in tourists' Italian. "Are you soon shutting up?"

For the main palazzo, which during the day was often shown to sightseers, was locked at half-past five, only the two *entresols*—one tenanted by Donna Laura, the other by the *custode*—remaining accessible.

The old man murmured something which Kitty did not understand, pointing at the same time to a door leading to the interior of the *piano nobile*. Kitty thought that he asked her to be quick, if she wished still to go round the palace. She tried to explain that he might lock up if he pleased; her way of retreat to the *mezzanino*, down the small staircase, was always open. Federigo looked puzzled, again said something in unintelligible Venetian, and led the way to the grand staircase followed by Lord Magellan.

A heavy door clanged below. Kitty was alone. She looked round her, at the stretches of marble floor, and the streaks of pale sunshine that lay upon its black and white, at the lofty walls painted with a dim superb architecture, at the crowded ceiling, the gorgeous candelabra. With its costly decoration, the great room suggested a rich and festal life; thronging groups below

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answering to the Tiepolo groups above; beauties patched and masked; gallants in brocaded coats; splendid senators, robed like William at the fancy ball.

Suddenly she caught sight of herself in one of the high and narrow mirrors that filled the spaces between the windows. In her mourning dress, with the light behind her, she made a tiny spectre in the immense hall. The image of her present self—frail, black-robed—recalled the two figures in the glass of her Hill Street room—the sparkling white of her goddess dress, and William's smiling face above hers, his arm round her waist.

How happy she had been that night! Even her wild fury with Mary Lyster seemed to her now a kind of happiness. How gladly would she have exchanged for it either of the two terrors that now possessed her!

With a shiver she crossed the hall, and pushed her way into the suite of rooms on the northern side. She felt herself in absolute possession of the palace. Federigo no doubt had locked up; her mother and a few guests were still talking in the *salon* of the *mezzanino*, expecting her to return. She would return—soon; but the solitariness and wildness of this deserted place drew her on.

Room after room opened before her—bare, save for a few worm-eaten chairs, a fragment of tapestry on the wall, or some tattered portraits in the Longhi manner, indifferent to begin with, and long since ruined by neglect. Yet here and there a young face looked out, roses in the hair and at the breast; or a Doge's cap—and beneath it phantom features still breathing even in the last decay of canvas and paint the violence and intrigue of the living man—the ghost of character held there by

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the ghost of art. Or a lad in slashed brocade, for whom even in this silent palace, and in spite of the gaping crack across his face, life was still young; a cardinal; a nun; a man of letters in clerical dress, the Abbé Prévost of his day . . .

Presently she found herself in a wide corridor, before a high, closed door. She tried it, and saw a staircase mounting and descending. A passion of curiosity that was half romance, half restlessness, drove her on. She began to ascend the marble steps, hearing only the echo of her own movements, a little afraid of the cold spaces of the vast house, and yet delighting in the fancies that crowded upon her. At the top of the flight she found, of course, another apartment, on the same plan as the one below, but smaller and less stately. The central hall entered from a door supported by marble caryatids, was flagged in yellow marble, and frescoed freely with faded eighteenth-century scenes—cardinals walking in stiff gardens, a pope alighting from his coach, surrounded by peasants on their knees, and behind him fountains and obelisk and the towering façade of St. Peter's. At the moment, thanks to a last glow of light coming in through a west window at the farther end, it was a place beautiful though forlorn. But the rooms into which she looked on either side were wreck and desolation itself, crowded with broken furniture, many of them shuttered and dark.

As she closed the last door, her attention was caught by a strange bust placed on a pedestal above the entrance. What was wrong with it? An accident? An injury? She went nearer, straining her eyes to see. No!—there was no injury. The face indeed was gone.

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Or, rather, where the face should have been there now descended a marble veil from brow to breast, of the most singular and sinister effect. Otherwise the bust was that of a young and beautiful woman. A pleasing horror seized on Kitty as she looked. Her fancy hunted for the clew. A faithless wife, blotted from her place? —made infamous forever by the veil which hid from human eye the beauty she had dishonored? Or a beloved mistress, on whom the mourning lover could no longer bear to look—the veil an emblem of undying and irremediable grief?

Kitty stood enthralled, striving to pierce the ghastly meaning of the bust, when a sound—a distant sound—sent a shock through her. She heard a step overhead, in the topmost apartment, or *mansarde* of the palace, a step that presently traversed the whole length of the floor immediately above her head and began to descend the stair.

Strange! Federigo must have shut the great gates by this time—as she had bade him? He himself inhabited the smaller *entresol* on the farther side of the palace, far away. Other inhabitants there were none; so Donna Laura had assured her

The step approached, resonant in the silence. Kitty, seized with nervous fright, turned and ran down the broad staircase by which she had come, through the series of deserted rooms in the *piano nobile*, till she reached the great hall.

There she paused, panting, curiosity and daring once more getting the upperhand. The door she had just passed through, which gave access to the staircase, opened again and shut. The stranger who had entered

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came leisurely towards the hall, lingering apparently now and then to look at objects on the way. Presently a voice—an exclamation.

Kitty retreated, caught at the arm of a chair for support, clung to it trembling. A man entered, holding his hat in one hand and a small white glove in the other.

At sight of the lady in black, standing on the other side of the hall, he started violently—and stopped. Then, just as Kitty, who had so far made neither sound nor movement, took the first hurried step towards the staircase by which she had entered, Geoffrey Cliffe came forward.

"How do you do, Lady Kitty? Do not, I beg of you, let me disturb you. I had half an hour to spare, and I gave the old man down-stairs a franc or two, that he might let me wander over this magnificent old place by myself for a bit. I have always had a fancy for deserted houses. You, I gather, have it, too. I will not interfere with you for a moment. Before I go, however, let me return what I believe to be your property."

He came nearer, with a studied, deliberate air, and held out the white glove. She saw it was her own and accepted it.

"Thank you."

She bowed with all the haughtiness she could muster, though her limbs shook under her. Then as she walked quickly towards the door of exit, Cliffe, who was nearer to it than she, also moved towards it, and threw it open for her. As she approached him he said, quietly:

"This is not the first time we have met in Venice, Lady Kitty."

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She wavered, could not avoid looking at him, and stood arrested. That almost white head!—that furrowed brow!—those haggard eyes! A slight, involuntary cry broke from her lips.

Cliffe smiled. Then he straightened his tall figure.

"You see, perhaps, that I have not grown younger. You are quite right. I have left my youth—what remained of it—among those splendid fellows whom the Turks have been harrying and torturing. Well!—they were worth it. I would give it them again."

There was a short silence.

The eyes of each perused the other's face. Kitty began some words, and left them unfinished. Cliffe resumed—in another tone—while the door he held swung gently backward, his hand following it.

"I spent last winter, as perhaps you know, with the Bosnian insurgents in the mountains. It was a tough business—hardships I should never have had the pluck to face if I had known what was before me. Then, in July, I got fever. I had to come away, to find a doctor, and I was a long time at Cattaro pulling round. And, meanwhile, the Turks—God blast them!—have been at their fiends' work. Half my particular friends, with whom I spent the winter, have been hacked to pieces since I left them."

She wavered, held by his look, by the coercion of that mingled passion and indifference with which he spoke. There was in his manner no suggestion whatever of things behind, no reference to herself or to the past between them. His passion, it seemed, was for his comrades; his indifference for her. What had he to do with her any more? He had been among the realities

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of battle and death, while she had been mincing and ambling along the usual feminine path. That was the utterance, it seemed, of the man's whole manner and personality, and nothing could have more effectually recalled Kitty's wild nature to the lure.

"Are you going back?" She had turned from him and was pulling at the fingers of the glove he had picked up.

"Of course! I am only kicking my heels here till I can collect the money and stores—ay, and the *men*—I want. I give my orders in London, and I must be here to see to the transshipment of stores and the embarkation of my small force! Not meant for the newspapers, you see, Lady Kitty—these little details!"

He drew himself up smiling, his worn aspect expressing just that mingling of dare-devil adventure with subtler and more self-conscious things which gave edge and power to his personality.

"I heard you were wounded," said Kitty, abruptly.

"So I was—badly. We were defending a *polje*—one of their high mountain valleys, against a Beg and his troops. My left arm"—he pointed to the black sling in which it was still held—"was nearly cut to pieces. However, it is practically well."

He took it out of the sling and showed that he could use it. Then his expression changed. He stepped back to the door, and opened it ceremoniously.

"Don't, however, let me delay you, Lady Kitty—by my chatter."

Kitty's cheeks were crimson. Her momentary yielding vanished in a passion of scorn. What!—he knew

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that she had seen him before, seen him with that woman—and he dared to play the mere shattered hero, kept in Venice by these crusader's reasons!

"Have you another volume on the way?" she asked him, as she advanced. "I read your last."

Her smile was the smile of an enemy. He eyed her strangely.

"Did you? That was waste of time."

"I think you intended I should read it."

He hesitated.

"Lady Kitty, those things are very far away. I can't defend myself—for they seem wiped out." He had crossed his arms, and was leaning back against the open door, a fine, rugged figure, by no means repentant.

Kitty laughed.

"You overstate the difference!"

"Between the past and the present? What does that mean?"

She dropped her eyes a moment, then raised them.

"Do you often go to San Lazzaro?"

He bowed.

"I had a suspicion that the vision at the window—though it was there only an instant—was you! So you saw Mademoiselle Ricci?"

His tone was assurance itself. Kitty disdained to answer. Her slight gesture bade him let her pass through; but he ignored it.

"I find her kind, Lady Kitty. She listens to me—I get sympathy from her."

"And you want sympathy?"

Her tone stung him. "As a hungry man wants food

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—as an artist wants beauty. But I know where I shall *not* get it."

"That is always a gain!" said Kitty, throwing back her little head. "Mr. Cliffe, pray let me bid you good-bye."

He suddenly made a step forward. "Lady Kitty!" —his deep-set, imperious eyes searched her face—"I can't restrain myself. Your look—your expression—go to my heart. Laugh at me if you like. It's true. What have you been doing with yourself?"

He bent towards her, scrutinizing every delicate feature, and, as it seemed, shaken with agitation. She breathed fast.

"Mr. Cliffe, you must know that any sympathy from you to me—is an insult! Kindly let me pass."

He, too, flushed deeply.

"Insult is a hard word, Lady Kitty. I regret that poem."

She swept forward in silence, but he still stood in the way.

"I wrote it—almost in delirium. Ah, well"—he shook his head impatiently—"if you don't believe me, let it be. I am not the man I was. The perspective of things is altered for me." His voice fell. "Women and children in their blood—heroic trust—and brute hate—the stars for candles—the high peaks for friends—those things have come between me and the past. But you are right; we had better not talk any more. I hear old Federigo coming up the stairs. Good-night, Lady Kitty —good-night!"

He opened the door. She passed him, and, to her own intense annoyance, a bunch of pale roses she carried at

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her belt brushed against the doorway, so that one broke and fell. She turned to pick it up, but it was already in Cliffe's hand. She held out hers, threateningly.

"I think not." He put it in his pocket. "Here is Federigo. Good-night."

It was quite dark when Kitty reached home. She groped her way up-stairs and opened the door of the *salon*. So weary was she that she dropped into the first chair, not seeing at first that any one was in the room. Then she caught sight of a brown-paper parcel, apparently just unfastened, on the table, and within it three books, of similar shape and size. A movement startled her.

"William!"

Ashe rose slowly from the deep chair in which he had been sitting. His aspect seemed to her terrified eyes utterly and wholly changed. In his hand he held a book like those on the table, and a paper-cutter. His face expressed the remote abstraction of a man who has been wrestling his way through some hard contest of the mind.

She ran to him. She wound her arms round him.

"William, William! I didn't mean any harm! I didn't! Oh, I have been so miserable! I tried to stop it—I did all I could. I have hardly slept at all—since we talked—you remember? Oh, William, look at me! Don't be angry with me!"

Ashe disengaged himself.

"I have asked Blanche to pack for me to-night, Kitty. I go home by the early train to-morrow."

"Home!"

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She stood petrified; then a light flashed into her face.

"You'll buy it all up? You'll stop it, William?"

Ashe drew himself together.

"I am going home," he said, with slow decision, "to place my resignation in the hands of Lord Parham."

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XXI

KITTY fell back in silence, staring at William. She loosened her mantle and threw it off, then she sat down in a chair near the wood fire, and bent over it, shivering.

"Of course you didn't mean that, William?" she said, at last.

Ashe turned.

"I should not have said it unless I had meant every word of it. It is, of course, the only thing to be done."

Kitty looked at him miserably. "But you *can't* mean that—that you'll resign because of that book?"

She pulled it towards her and turned over the pages with a hand that trembled. "That would be too foolish!"

Ashe made no reply. He was standing before the fire, with his hands in his pockets, and a face half absent, half ironical, as though his mind followed the sequences of a far distant future.

"William!" She caught the sleeve of his coat with a little cry. "I wrote that book because I thought it would help you."

His attention came back to her.

"Yes, Kitty, I believe you did."

She gulped down a sob. His tone was so odd, so remote.

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"Many people have done such things. I know they have. Why—why, it was only meant—as a skit—to make people laugh! There's *no* harm in it, William."

Ashe, without speaking, took up the book and looked back at certain pages, which he seemed to have marked. Kitty's feeling as she watched him was the feeling of the condemned culprit, held dumb and strangled in the grip of his own sense of justice, and yet passionately conscious how much more he could say for himself than anybody is ever likely to say for him.

"When did you have the first idea of this book, Kitty?"

"About a year ago," she said, in a low voice.

"In October? At Haggart?"

Kitty nodded.

Ashe thought. Her admission took him back to the autumn weeks at Haggart, after the Cliffe crisis and the rearrangement of the ministry in the July of that year. He well remembered that those weeks had been weeks of special happiness for both of them. Afterwards, the winter had brought many renewed qualms and vexations. But in that period, between the storms of the session and Kitty's escapades in the hunting-field, memory recalled a tender, melting time—a time rich in hidden and exquisite hours, when with Kitty on his breast, lip to lip and heart to heart, he had reaped, as it seemed to him, the fruits of that indulgence which, as he knew, his mother scorned. And at that very moment, behind his back, out of his sight, she had begun this atrocious thing.

He looked at her again—the bitterness almost at his lips, almost beyond his control.

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"I wish I knew what could have been your possible object in writing it?"

She sat up and confronted him. The color flamed back again into her pale cheeks.

"You know I told you—when we had that talk in London—that I wanted to write. I thought it would be good for me—would take my thoughts off—well, what had happened. And I began to write this—and it amused me to find I could do it—and I suppose I got carried away. I loved describing you, and glorifying you—and I loved making caricatures of Lady Parham—and all the people I hated. I used to work at it whenever you were away—or I was dull and there was nothing to do.

"Did it never occur to you," said Ashe, interrupting, "that it might get you—get us both—into trouble, and that you ought to tell me?"

She wavered.

"No!" she said, at last. "I never did mean to tell you, while I was writing it. You know I don't tell lies, William! The real fact is, I was afraid you'd stop it."

"Good God!" He threw up his hands with a sound of amazement, then thrust them again into his pockets and began to pace up and down.

"But then"—she resumed—"I thought you'd soon get over it, and that it was funny—and everybody would laugh—and you'd laugh—and there would be an end of it."

He turned and stared at her. "Frankly, Kitty—I don't understand what you can be made of! You imagined that that sketch of Lord Parham"—he struck

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the open page—"a sketch written by *my wife*, describing my official chief—when he was my guest—under my own roof—with all sorts of details of the most intimate and offensive kind—mocking his speech—his manners—his little personal ways—charging him with being the corrupt tool of Lady Parham, disloyal to his colleagues, a man not to be trusted—and justifying all this by a sort of evidence that you could only have got as my wife and Lord Parham's hostess—you actually supposed that you could write and publish *that!*—without in the first place its being plain to every Tom, Dick, and Harry that you had written it—and in the next, without making it impossible for your husband to remain a colleague of the man you had treated in such a way? Kitty!—you are not a stupid woman! Do you really mean to say that you could write and publish this book without *knowing* that you were doing a wrong action—which, so far from serving me, could only damage my career irreparably? Did nothing—did no one warn you—if you were determined to keep such a secret from your husband, whom it most concerned?"

He had come to stand beside her, both hands on the back of a chair—stooping forward to emphasize his words—the lines of his fine face and noble brow contracted by anger and pain.

"Mr. Darrell warned me," said Kitty, in a low voice, as though those imperious eyes compelled the truth from her—"but of course I didn't believe him."

"Darrell!" cried Ashe, in amazement—"Darrell! You confided in him?"

"I told him all about it. It was he who took it to a publisher."

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"Hound!" said Ashe, between his teeth. "So that was his revenge."

"Oh, you needn't blame him too much," said Kitty, proudly, not understanding the remark. "He wrote to me not long ago to say it was horribly unwise—and that he washed his hands of it."

"Ay—when he'd done the deed! When did you show it him?" said Ashe, impetuously.

"At Haggart—in August."

"*Et tu, Brute!*" said Ashe, turning away. "Well, that's done with. Now the only thing to do is to face the music. I go home. Whatever can be done to withdraw the book from circulation I shall, of course, do; but I gather from this precious letter"—he held up the note which had been enclosed in the parcel—"that some thousands of copies have already been ordered by the booksellers, and a few distributed to 'persons in high places.'"

"William," she said, in despair, catching his arm again—"listen! I offered the man two hundred pounds only yesterday to stop it."

Ashe laughed.

"What did he reply?"

"He said it was impossible. Fifty copies had been already issued.

"The review copies, no doubt. By next week there will be, I should say, five thousand in the shops. Your man understands his business, Kitty. This is the kind of puff preliminary he has been scattering about."

And with sparkling eyes he handed to her a printed slip containing an outline of the book for the information of the booksellers.

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It drew attention to the extraordinary interest of the production as a painting of the upper class by the hand of one belonging to its inmost circle. "People of the highest social and political importance will be recognized at once; the writer handles cabinet ministers and their wives with equal freedom, and with a touch betraying the closest and most intimate knowledge. Details hitherto quite unknown to the public of ministerial combinations and intrigues—especially of the feminine influences involved—will be found here in their lightest and most amusing form. A certain famous fancy ball will be identified without difficulty. Scathing as some of the portraits are, the writer is by no means merely cynical. The central figure of the book is a young and rising statesman, whose aim and hopes are touched with a loving hand—the charm of the portrait being only equalled by the venom with which the writer assails those who have thwarted or injured his hero. But our advice is simply—'Buy and Read!' Conjecture will run wild about the writer. All we can say is that the most romantic or interesting surmise that can possibly be formed will fall far short of the reality."

"The beast is a shrewd beast!" said Ashe, as he raised himself from the stooping position in which he had been following the sentences over Kitty's shoulder. "He knows that the public will rush for his wares! How much money did he offer you, Kitty?"

He turned sharply on his heel to wait for her reply.

"A hundred pounds," said Kitty, almost inaudibly—"and a hundred more if five thousand sold." She had returned again to her crouching attitude over the fire.

"Generous!—upon my word!" said Ashe, scornfully

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turning over the two thick-leaved, loosely printed Mudie volumes. "A guinea to the public, I suppose—fifteen shillings to the trade. Darrell didn't exactly advise you to advantage, Kitty."

Kitty kept silence. The sarcastic violence of his tone fell on her like a blow. She seemed to shrink together; while Ashe resumed his walk to and fro.

Presently, however, she looked up, to ask, in a voice that tried for steadiness:

"What do you mean to do—exactly—William?"

"I shall, of course, buy up all I can; I shall employ some lawyer fellow, and appeal to the good feelings of the newspapers. There will be no trouble with the respectable ones. But some copies will get out, and some of the Opposition newspapers will make capital out of them. Naturally!—they'd be precious fools if they didn't."

A momentary hope sprang up in Kitty.

"But if you buy it up—and stop all the papers that matter," she faltered—"why should you resign, William? There won't be—such great harm done."

For answer he opened the book, and without speaking pointed to two passages—the first, an account full of point and malice of the negotiations between himself and Lord Parham at the time when he entered the cabinet, the conditions he himself had made, and the confidential comments of the Premier on the men and affairs of the moment.

"Do you remember the night when I told you those things, Kitty?"

Yes, Kitty remembered well. It was a night of intimate talk between man and wife, a night when she

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had shown him her sweetest, tenderest mood, and he—incorrigible optimist!—had persuaded himself that she was growing as wise as she was lovely.

Her lip trembled. Then he pointed to the second—to the pitiless picture of Lord Parham at Haggart.

"You wrote that—when he was under our roof—there by our pressing invitation! You couldn't have written it—unless he had so put himself in your power. A wandering Arab, Kitty, will do no harm to the man who has eaten and drunk in his tent!"

She looked up, and as she read his face she understood at last how what she had done had outraged in him all the natural and all the inherited instincts of a generous and fastidious nature. The "great gentleman," so strong in him as in all the best of English statesmen, whether they spring from the classes or the masses, was up in arms.

She sprang to her feet with a cry. "William, you can't give up politics! It would make you miserable."

"That can't be helped. And I couldn't go on like this, Kitty—even if this affair of the book could be patched up. The strain's too great."

They were but a yard apart, and yet she seemed to be looking at him across a gulf.

"You have been so happy in your work!" This time the sob escaped her.

"Oh, don't let's talk about that," he said, abruptly, as he walked away. "There'll be a certain relief in giving up the impossible. I'll go back to my books. We can travel, I suppose, and put politics out of our heads."

"But—you won't resign your seat?"

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"No," he said, after a pause—"no. As far as I can see at present, I sha'n't resign my seat, though my constituents, of course, will be very sick. But I doubt whether I shall stand again."

Every phrase fell as though with a thud on Kitty's ear. It was the wreck of a man's life, and she had done it.

"Shall you—shall you go and see Lord Parham?" she asked, after a pause.

"I shall write to him first. I imagine"—he pointed to the letter lying on the table—"that creature has already sent him the book. Then later I daresay I shall see him."

She looked up.

"If I wrote and told him it was all my doing, William? —if I grovelled to him?"

"The responsibility is mine," he said, sternly. "I had no business to tell even you the things printed there. I told them at my own risk. If anything I say has any weight with you, Kitty, you will write nothing."

She spread out her hands to the fire again, and he heard her say, as though to herself:

"The thing is—the awful thing is, that I'm mad—I must be mad. I never thought of all this when I was writing it. I wrote it in a kind of dream. In the first place, I wanted to glorify you—"

He broke into an exclamation.

"Your *taste*, Kitty!—where was your taste? That a wife should praise a husband in public! You could only make us both laughing-stocks."

His handsome features quivered a little. He felt this part of it the most galling, the most humiliating of all;

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and she understood. In his eyes she had shown herself not only reckless and treacherous, but indelicate, vulgar, capable of besmirching the most sacred and intimate of relations.

She rose from her seat.

"I must go and take my things off," she said, in "a vague voice," and as she moved she tottered a little. He turned to look at her. Amid his own crushing sense of defeat and catastrophe, his natural and righteous indignation, he remembered that she had been ill—he remembered their child. But whether from the excitement, first of the meeting in the Vercelli palace, and now of this scene—or merely from the heat of the fire over which she had been hanging, her cheeks were flushed, her eyes blazed. Her beauty had never been more evident; but it made little appeal to him; it was the wild, ungovernable beauty from which he had suffered. He saw that she was excited, but there was an air also of returning physical vigor; and the nascent feeling which might have been strengthened by pallor and prostration died away.

Kitty moved as though to pass him and go to her room, which opened out of the *salon*. But as she neared him she suddenly caught him by the arm.

"William!—William! don't do it!—don't resign! Let me apologize!"

He was angered by her persistence, and merely said, coldly:

"I have given you my reasons, Kitty, why such a course is impossible."

"And—and you start to-morrow morning?"

"By the early train. Please let me go, Kitty. There

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are many things to arrange. I must order the gondola, and see if the people here can cash me a check."

"You mean—to leave me alone?" The words had a curious emphasis.

"I had a few words with Miss French before you came in. The packet arrived by the evening post, and seeing that it was books—for you—I opened it. After about an hour"—he turned and walked away again—"I saw my bearings. Then I called Miss French, told her I should have to go to-morrow, and asked her how long she could stay with you."

"William!" cried Kitty again, leaning heavily on the table beside her—"don't go!—don't leave me!"

His face darkened.

"So you would prevent me from taking the only honorable, the only decent way out of this thing that remains to me?"

She made no immediate reply. She stood—wrapped apparently in painful abstraction—a creature lovely and distraught. The masses of her fair hair loosened by the breeze on the canal had fallen about her cheeks and shoulders; her black hat framed the white brow and large, feverish eyes; and the sable cape she had worn in the gondola had slipped down over the thin, sloping shoulders, revealing the young figure and the slender waist. She might have been a child of seventeen, grieving over the death of her goldfinch.

Ashe gathered together his official letters and papers, found his check-book, and began to write. While he wrote he explained that Miss French could keep her company at least another fortnight, that he could leave

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with them four or five circular notes for immediate expenses, and would send more from home directly he arrived.

In the middle of his directions Kitty once more appealed to him in a passionate, muffled voice not to go. This time he lost his temper, and without answering her he hastily left the room to arrange his packing with his valet.

When he returned to the *salon* Kitty was not there. He and Miss French—who knew only that something tragic had happened in which Kitty was concerned—kept up a fragmentary conversation till dinner was announced and Kitty entered. She had evidently been weeping, but with powder and rouge she had tried to conceal the traces of her tears; and at dinner she sat silent, hardly answering when Margaret French spoke to her.

After dinner Ashe went out with his cigar towards the Piazza. He was in a smarting, dazed state, beginning, however, to realize the blow more than he had done at first. He believed that Parham himself would not be at all sorry to be rid of him. He and his friends formed a powerful group both in the cabinet and out of it. But they were forcing the pace, and the elements of resistance and reaction were strong. He pictured the dismay of his friends, the possible breakdown of the reforming party. Of course they might so stand by him—and the suppression of the book might be so complete—

At this moment he caught sight of a newspaper contents bill displayed at the door of the only shop in the Piazza which sold English newspapers. One of the lines

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ran, "Anonymous attack on the Premier." He started, went in and bought the paper. There, in the "London Topics" column, was the following paragraph:

"A string of extracts from a forthcoming book, accompanied by a somewhat startling publisher's statement, has lately been sent round to the press. We are asked not to print them before the day of publication, but they have already roused much attention, if not excitement. They certainly contain a very gross attack on the Prime Minister, based apparently on first-hand information, and involving indiscretions personal and political of an unusually serious character. The wife of a cabinet minister is freely named as the writer, and even if no violation of cabinet secrecy is concerned, it is clear that the book outrages the confidential relations which ought to subsist between a Premier and his colleagues, if government on our English system is to be satisfactorily carried on. The statements it makes with every appearance of authority both as to the relations between Lord Parham and some of the most important members of his cabinet, and as to the Premier's intentions with regard to one or two of the most vital questions now before the country, are calculated seriously to embarrass the government. We fear the book will have a veritable *succès de scandale*."

"That fellow at least has done his best to kick the ball, damn him!" thought Ashe, with contempt, as he thrust the paper into his pocket.

It was no more than he expected; but it put an end to all thoughts of a more hopeful kind. He walked up and down the Piazza smoking, till midnight, counting the hours till he could reach London, and revolving the

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phrases of a telegram to be sent to his solicitor before starting.

Kitty made no sign or sound when he entered her room. Her fair head was turned away from him, and all was dark. He could hardly believe that she was asleep; but it was a relief to him to accept her pretence of it, and to escape all further conversation. He himself slept but little. The mere profundity of the Venetian silence teased him; it reminded him how far he was from home.

Two images pursued him—of Kitty writing the book, while he was away electioneering or toiling at his new office—and then, of his returns to Haggart—tired or triumphant—on many a winter evening, of her glad rush into his arms, her sparkling face on his breast.

Or again, he conjured up the scene when the MS. had been shown to Darrell—his pretence of disapproval, his sham warnings, and the smile on his sallow face as he walked off with it. Ashe looked back to the early days of his friendship with Darrell, when he, Ashe, was one of the leaders at Eton, popular with the masters in spite of his incorrigible idleness, and popular with the boys because of his bodily prowess, and Darrell had been a small, sickly, bullied colleger. Scene after scene recurred to him, from their later relations at Oxford also. There was a kind of deliberation in the way in which he forced his thoughts into this channel; it made an outlet for a fierce bitterness of spirit, which some imperious instinct forbade him to spend on Kitty.

He dozed in the later hours of the night, and was roused by something touching his hand, which lay outside the bedclothes. Again the little head!—and the soft curls. Kitty was there—crouched beside him—weep-

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ing. There flashed into his mind an image of the night in London when she had come to him thus; and unwelcome as the whole remembrance was, he was conscious of a sudden swelling wave of pity and passion. What if he sprang up, caught her in his arms, forgave her, and bade the world go hang!

No! The impulse passed, and in his turn he feigned sleep. The thought of her long deceit, of the selfish wilfulness wherewith she had requited deep love and easy trust, was too much; it seared his heart. And there was another and a subtler influence. To have forgiven so easily would have seemed treachery to those high ambitions and ideals from which—as he thought, only too certainly—she had now cut him off. It was part of his surviving youth that the catastrophe seemed to him so absolute. Any thought of the fresh efforts which would be necessary for the reconquering of his position was no less sickening to him than that of the immediate discomforts and humiliations to be undergone. He would go back to books and amusement; and in the idling of the future there would be plenty of time for love-making.

In the morning, when all preparations were made, the gondoliers waiting below, Ashe's telegram sent, and the circular notes handed over to Margaret French, who had discreetly left the room, William approached his wife.

"Good-bye!" said Kitty, and gave him her hand, with a strange look and smile.

Ashe, however, drew her to him and kissed her—against her will. "I'll do my best, Kitty," he said, in a

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would-be cheery voice—"to pull us through. Perhaps—I don't know!—things may turn out better than I think. Good-bye. Take care of yourself. I'll write, of course. Don't hurry home. You'll want a fortnight or three weeks yet."

Kitty said not a word, and in another minute he was gone. The Italian servants congregated below at the water-gate sent laughing "A rivederlas" after the handsome, good-tempered Englishman, whom they liked and regretted; the gondola moved off; Kitty heard the plash of the water. But she held back from the window.

Half-way to the bend of the canal beyond the Accademia, Ashe turned and gave a long look at the balcony. No one was there. But just as the gondola was passing out of sight, Kitty slipped onto the balcony. She could see only the figure of Piero, the gondolier, and in another second the boat was gone. She stayed there for many minutes, clinging to the balustrade and staring, as it seemed, at the sparkle of autumnal sun which danced on the green water and on the red palace to her right.

All the morning Kitty on her sofa pretended to write letters. Margaret French, working or reading behind her, knew that she scarcely got through a single note, that her pen lay idle on the paper, while her eyes absently watched the palace windows on the other side of the canal. Miss French was quite certain that some tragic cause of difference between the husband and wife had arisen. Kitty, the indiscreet, had for once kept her own counsel about the book, and Ashe had with his own hands packed away the volumes which had arrived the

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night before; so that she could only guess, and from that delicacy of feeling restrained her as much as possible.

Once or twice Kitty seemed on the point of unburdening herself. Then overmastering tears would threaten; she would break off and begin to write. At luncheon her look alarmed Miss French, so white was the little face, so large and restless the eyes. Ought Mr. Ashe to have left her, and left her apparently in anger? No doubt he thought her much better. But Margaret remembered the worst days of her illness, the anxious looks of the doctors, and the anguish that Kitty had suffered in the first weeks after her child's death. She seemed now, indeed, to have forgotten little Harry, so far as outward expression went; but who could tell what was passing in her strange, unstable mind? And it often seemed to Margaret that the signs of the past summer were stamped on her indelibly, for those who had eyes to see.

Was it the perception of this pity beside her that drove Kitty to solitude and flight? At any rate, she said after luncheon that she would go to Madame d'Estrées, and did not ask Miss French to accompany her.

She set out accordingly with the two gondoliers. But she had hardly passed the Accademia before she bid her men take a cross-cut to the Giudecca. On these wide waters, with their fresher air and fuller sunshine, a certain physical comfort seemed to breathe upon her.

"Piero, it is not rough! Can we go to the Lido?" she asked the gondolier behind her.

Piero, who was all smiles and complaisance, as well he might be with a lady who scattered *lire* as freely as

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Kitty did, turned the boat at once for that channel "Del Orfano" where the bones of the vanquished dead lie deep amid the ooze.

They passed San Giorgio, and were soon among the piles and sand-banks of the lagoon. Kitty sat in a dream which blotted the sunshine from the water. It seemed to her that she was a dead creature, floating in a dead world. William had ceased to love her. She had wrecked his career and destroyed her own happiness. Her child had been taken from her. Lady Tranmore's affection had been long since alienated. Her own mother was nothing to her; and her friends in society, like Madeleine Alcot, would only laugh and gloat over the scandal of the book.

No—everything was finished! As her fingers hanging over the side of the gondola felt the touch of the water, her morbid fancy, incredibly quick and keen, fancied herself drowned, or poisoned—lying somehow white and cold on a bed where William might see and forgive her.

Then with a start of memory which brought the blood rushing to her face, she thought of Cliffe standing beside the door of the great hall in the Vercelli palace—she seemed to be looking again into those deep, expressive eyes, held by the irony and the passion with which they were infused. Had the passion any reference to her?—or was it merely part of the man's nature, as inseparable from it as flame from the volcano? If William had cast her off, was there still one man—wild and bad, indeed, like herself, but poet and hero nevertheless—who loved her?

She did not much believe it; but still the possibility of it lured her, like some dark gulf that promised her

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oblivion from this pain—pain which tortured one so impatient of distress, so hungry for pleasure and praise.

In those days the Lido was still a noble and solitary shore, without the degradations of to-day.

Kitty walked fast and furiously across the sandy road, and over the shingles, turning, when she reached the firm sand, southward towards Malamocco. It was between four and five, and the autumn afternoon was fast declining. A fresh breeze was on the sea, and the short waves, intensely blue under a wide, clear heaven, broke in dazzling foam on the red-brown sand.

She seemed to be alone between sea and sky, save for two figures approaching from the south—a fisher-boy with a shrimping-net and a man walking bareheaded. She noticed them idly. A mirage of sun was between her and them, and the agony of remorse and despair which held her blunted all perceptions.

Thus it was that not till she was close upon him did her dazzled sight recognize Geoffrey Cliffe.

He saw her first, and stopped in motionless astonishment on the edge of the sand. She almost ran against him, when his voice arrested her.

"Lady Kitty!"

She put her hand to her breast, wavered, and came to a stand-still. He saw a little figure in black between him and those "gorgeous towers and cloud-capped palaces" of Alpine snow, which dimly closed in the north; and beneath the drooping hat a face even more changed and tragic than that which had haunted him since their meeting of the day before.

"How do you do?" she said, mechanically, and would

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have passed him. But he stood in her path. As he stared at her an impulse of rage ran through him, resenting the wreck of anything so beautiful—rage against Ashe, who must surely be somehow responsible.

"Aren't you wandering too far, Lady Kitty?" His voice shook under the restraint he put upon it. "You seem tired—very tired—and you are perhaps farther from your gondola than you think."

"I am not tired."

He hesitated.

"Might I walk with you a little, or do you forbid me?"

She said nothing, but walked on. He turned and accompanied her. One or two questions that he put to her — Had she companions? — Where had she left her gondola?—remained unanswered. He studied her face, and at last he laid a strong hand upon her arm.

"Sit down. You are not fit for any more walking."

He drew her towards some logs of driftwood on the upper sand, and she sank down upon them. He found a place beside her.

"What is the matter with you?" he said, abruptly, with a harsh authority. "You are in trouble."

A tremor shook her—as of the prisoner who feels on his limbs the first touch of the fetter.

"No, no!" she said, trying to rise; "it is nothing. I—I didn't know it was so far. I must go home."

His hand held her.

"Kitty!"

"Yes." Her voice was scarcely audible.

"Tell me what hurts you! Tell me why you are here, alone, with a face like that! Don't be afraid of me!

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Could I lift a finger to harm a mother that has lost her child? Give me your hands." He gathered both hers into the warm shelter of his own. "Look at me—trust me! My heart has grown, Kitty, since you knew me last. It has taken into itself so many griefs—so many deaths. Tell me your griefs, poor child!—tell me!"

He stooped and kissed her hands—most tenderly, most gravely.

Tears rushed into her eyes. The wild emotions that were her being were roused beyond control. Bending towards him she began to pour out, first brokenly, then in a torrent, the wretched, incoherent story, of which the mere telling, in such an ear, meant new treachery to William and new ruin for herself.

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XXII

ON a certain cloudy afternoon, some ten days later, a fishing-boat, with a patched orange sail, might have been seen scudding under a light northwesterly breeze through the channels which connect the island of San Francesco with the more easterly stretches of the Venetian lagoon. The boat presently neared the shore of one of the cultivated *lidi*—islands formed out of the silt of many rivers by the travail of centuries, some of them still mere sand or mud banks, others covered by vineyards and fruit orchards—which, with the *murazzi* or sea-walls of Venice, stand sentinel between the city and the sea. On the *lido* along which the boat was coasting, the vintage was long since over and the fruit gathered; the last yellow and purple leaves in the orchards, "a pestilent-stricken multitude," were to-day falling fast to earth, under the sighing, importunate wind. The air was warm; November was at its mildest. But all color and light were drowned in floating mists, and darkness lay over the distant city. It was one of those drear and ghostly days which may well have breathed into the soul of Shelley that superb vision of the dead generations of Venice, rising, a phantom host from the bosom of the sunset, and sweeping in "a rapid mask of death" over the shadowed waters that saw the birth and may yet furnish the tomb of so vast a fame.

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Two persons were in the boat—Kitty, wrapped in sables, her straying hair held close by a cap of the same fur—and Geoffrey Cliffe. They had been wandering in the lagoons all day, in order to escape from Venice and observers—first at Torcello, then at San Francesco, and now they were ostensibly coming home in a wide sweep along the northern *lidi* and *murazzi*, that Cliffe might show his companion, from near by, the Porto del Lido, that exit from the lagoons where the salt lakes grow into the sea.

A certain wildness and exaltation, drawn from the solitudes around them and from their *tête-à-tête*, could be read in both the man and the woman. Cliffe watched his companion incessantly. As he lay against the side of the boat at her feet, he saw her framed in the curving sides of the stern, and could read her changing expressions. Not a happy face!—that he knew! A face haunted by shadows from an underworld of thought—pursuing furies of remorse and fear. Not the less did he triumph that he had it *there*, in his power; nor had the flashes of terror and wavering will which he discerned in any way diminished its beauty.

"How long have you known—that woman?" Kitty asked him, suddenly, after a pause broken only by the playing of the wind with the sail.

Cliffe laughed.

"The Ricci? Why do you want to know, madame?"

She made a contemptuous lip.

"I knew her first," said Cliffe, "some years ago in Milan. She was then at La Scala—walking on—paid for her good looks. Then somebody sent her to Paris to the Conservatoire, which she only left this spring.

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"SHE THOUGHT OF CLIFFE STANDING BESIDE THE DOOR OF THE GREAT HALL"

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This is her first Italian engagement. Her people are shopkeepers here—in the Merceria—which helped her. She is as vain as a peacock and as dangerous as a pet panther."

"Dangerous!" Kitty's scorn had passed into her voice.

"Well, Italy is still the country of the knife," said Cliffe, lightly—"and I could still hire a bravo or two—in Venice—if I wanted them."

"Does the Ricci hire them?"

Cliffe shrugged his shoulders.

"She'd do it without winking, if it suited her." Then, after a pause—"Do you still wonder why I should have chosen her society?"

"Oh no," said Kitty, hastily. "You told me."

"As much as a *friend* cares to know?"

She nodded, flushing, and dropped the subject.

Cliffe's mouth still smiled, but his eyes studied her with a veiled and sinister intensity.

"I have not seen the lady for a week," he resumed. "She pesters me with notes. I promised to go and see her in a new play to-morrow night, but—"

"Oh, go!" said Kitty—"by all means go!"

"'Ruy Blas' in Italian? I think not. Ah! did you see that gleam on the Campanile?—marvellous! . . . Miladi, I have a question to ask you."

"*Dites!*" said Kitty.

"Did you put me into your book?"

"Certainly."

"What kind of things did you say?"

"The worst I could!"

"Ah! How shall I get a copy?" said Cliffe, musing.

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She made no answer, but she was conscious of a sudden movement—was it of terror? At the bottom of her soul was she, indeed, afraid of the man beside her?

"By-the-way," he resumed, "you promised to tell me your news of this morning. But you haven't told me a word!"

She turned away. She had gathered her furs around her, and her face was almost hidden by them.

"Nothing is settled," she said, in a cold, reluctant voice.

"Which means that you won't tell me anything more?"

She was silent. Her lip had a proud line which piqued him.

"You think I am not worthy to know?"

Her eye gleamed.

"What does it matter to you?"

"Oh, nothing! I should have been glad to hear that all was well, and Ashe's mind at rest about his prospects."

"His prospects!" she repeated, with a scorn which stung. "How *dare* we mention his name here at all?"

Cliffe reddened.

"I dare," he said, calmly.

Kitty looked at him—a quivering defiance in face and frame; then bent forward.

"Would you like to know—who is the best—the noblest—the handsomest—the most generous—the most delightful man I have ever met?"

Each word came out winged and charged with a strange intensity of passion.

"Do I?" said Cliffe, raising his eyebrows—"do I want to know?"

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Her look held him.

"My husband, William Ashe!"

And she fell back, flushed and breathless, like one who throws out a rebel and challenging flag.

Cliffe was silent a moment, observing her.

"Strange!" he said, at last. "It is only when you are miserable you are kind. I could wish you miserable again, *chérie*."

Tone and look broke into a sombre wildness before which she shrank. Her own violence passed away. She leaned over the side of the boat, struggling with tears.

"Then you have your wish," was her muffled answer.

The three bronzed Venetians, a father and two sons, who were working the *bragozzo* glanced curiously at the pair. They were persuaded that these charterers of their boat were lovers flying from observation, and the unknown tongue did but stimulate guessing.

Cliffe raised himself impatiently.

They were nearing a point where the line of *murazzi* they had been following—low breakwaters of great strength—swept away from them outward and eastward towards a distant opening. On the other side of the channel was a low line of shore, broadening into the Lido proper, with its scattered houses and churches, and soon lost in the mist as it stretched towards the south.

"Ecco!—il Porto del Lido!" said the older boatman, pointing far away to a line of deeper color beneath a dark and lowering sky.

Kitty bent over the side of the boat staring towards the dim spot he showed her—where was the mouth of the sea.

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"Kitty!" said Cliffe's voice beside her, hoarse and hurried—"one word, and I tell these fellows to set their helm for Trieste. This boat will carry us well—and the wind is with us."

She turned and looked him in the face.

"And then?"

"Then? We'll think it out together, Kitty—together!" He bent his lips to her hand, bending so as to conceal the action from the sailors. But she drew her hand away.

"You and I," she said, fiercely—"would tire of each other in a week!"

"Have the courage to try! No!—you should not tire of me in a week! I would find ways to keep you mine, Kitty—cradled, and comforted, and happy."

"Happy!" Her slight laugh was the forlornest thing. "Take me out to sea—and drop me there—with a stone round my neck. That might be worth doing—perhaps."

He surveyed her unmoved.

"Listen, Kitty! This kind of thing can't go on forever."

"What are you waiting for?" she said, tauntingly. "You ought to have gone last week."

"I am not going," he said, raising himself by a sudden movement—"till you come with me!"

Kitty started, her eyes riveted to his.

"And yet go I will! Not even you shall stop me, Kitty. I'll take the help I've gathered back to those poor devils—if I die for it. But you'll come with me—you'll come!"

She drew back—trembling under an impression she strove to conceal.

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"If you will talk such madness, I can't help it," she said, with shortened breath.

"Yes—you'll come!" he said, nodding. "What have you to do with Ashe, Kitty, any longer? You and he are already divided. You have tried life together and what have you made of it? You're not fit for this mincing, tripping London life—nor am I? And as for morals—I'll tell you a strange thing, Kitty." He bent forward and grasped her hands with a force which hurt —from which she could not release herself. "I believe —yes, by God, I believe!—that I am a better man than I was before I started on this adventure. It's been like drinking at last at the very source of life—living, not talking about it. One bitter night last February, for instance, I helped a man—one of the insurgents— who had taken to the mountains with his wife and children—to carry his wife, a dying woman, over a mountain-pass to the only place where she could possibly get help and shelter. We carried her on a litter, six men taking turns. The cold and the fatigue were such that I shudder now when I think of it. Yet at the end I seemed to myself a man reborn. I was happier than I had ever been in my life. Some mystic virtue had flowed into me. Among those men and women, instead of being the selfish beast I've been all these years, I can forget myself. Death seems nothing—brotherhood —liberty!—everything! And yet—"

His face relaxed, became ironical, reflective. But he held the hands close, his grasp of them hidden by the folds of fur which hung about her.

"And *yet*—I can say to you without a qualm—put this marriage which has already come to naught behind

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you—and come with me! Ashe cramps you. He blames you—you blame yourself. What *reality* has all that? It makes you miserable—it wastes life. *I* accept your nature—I don't ask you to be anything else than yourself—your wild, vain, adorable self! Ashe asks you to put restraint on yourself—to make painful efforts—to be good for his sake—the sake of something outside. *I* say—come and look at the elemental things—death and battle—hatred, solitude, love. *They'll* sweep us out of ourselves!—no need to strive and cry for it—into the great current of the world's being—bring us close to the forces at the root of things—the forces which create—and destroy. Dip your heart in that stream, Kitty, and feel it grow in your breast. Take a nurse's dress—put your hand in mine—and come! I can't promise you luxuries or ease. You've had enough of those. Come and open another door in the House of Life! Take starving women and hunted children into your arms—feel with them—weep with them—look with them into the face of death! Make friends with nature—with rocks, forests, torrents—with night and dawn, which you've never seen, Kitty! They'll love you—they'll support you—the rough people—and the dark forests. They'll draw nature's glamour round you—they'll pour her balm into your soul. And I shall be with you—beside you!—your guardian—your lover—your *lover*, Kitty—till death do us part."

He looked at her with the smile which was his only but sufficient beauty; the violent, exciting words flowed in her ear, amid the sound of rising waves and the distant talk of the fishermen. His hand crushed hers; his mad, imploring eyes repelled and constrained her. The

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wild hungers and curiosities of her being rushed to meet him; she heard the echo of her own words to Ashe: "More life—more *life!*—even though it lead to pain—and agony—and tears!"

Then she wrenched herself away—suddenly, contemptuously.

"Of course, that's all nonsense—romantic nonsense. You've perhaps forgotten that I am one of the women who don't stir without their maid."

Cliffe's expression changed. He thrust his hands into his pockets.

"Oh, well, if you must have a maid," he said, dryly, "that settles it. A maid would be the deuce. And yet—I think I could find you a Bosnian girl—strong and faithful—"

Their eyes met—his already full of a kind of ownership, tender, confident, humorous even—hers alive with passionate anger and resistance.

"*Without a qualm!*" she repeated, in a low voice—"without a qualm! Mon Dieu!"

She turned and looked towards the Adriatic.

"Where are we?" she said, imperiously.

For a gesture of command on Cliffe's part, unseen by her, had sent the boat eastward, spinning before the wind. The lagoon was no longer tranquil. It was covered with small waves; and the roar of the outer sea, though still far off, was already in their ears. The mist lifting showed white, distant crests of foam on a tumbling field of water, and to the north, clothed in tempestuous purple, the dim shapes of mountains.

Kitty raised herself, and beckoned towards the captain of the *bragozzo*.

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"Giuseppe!"

"Commanda, Eccellenza!"

The man came forward.

With a voice sharp and clear, she gave the order to return at once to Venice. Cliffe watched her, the veins on his forehead swelling. She knew that he debated with himself whether he should give a counter-order or no.

"A Venezia!" said Kitty, waving her hand towards the sailors, her eyes shining under the tangle of her hair.

The helm was put round, and beneath a tacking sail the boat swept southward.

With an awkward laugh Cliffe fell back into his seat, stretching his long limbs across the boat. He had spoken under a strong and genuine impulse. His passion for her had made enormous strides in these few wild days beside her. And yet the fantastic poet's sense responded at a touch to the new impression. He shook off the heroic mood as he had doffed his Bosnian cloak. In a few minutes, though the heightened color remained, he was chatting and laughing as though nothing had happened.

She, exhausted physically and morally by her conflict with him, hardly spoke on the way home. He entertained her, watching her all the time—a hundred speculations about her passing through his brain. He understood perfectly how the insight which she had allowed him into her grief and her remorse had broken down the barriers between them. Her incapacity for silence, and reticence, had undone her. Was he a villain to have taken advantage of it?

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Why? With a strange, half-cynical clearness he saw her, as the obstacle that she was, in Ashe's life and career. For Ashe—supposing he, Cliffe, persuaded her—there would be no doubt a first shock of wrath and pain—then a sense of deliverance. For her, too, deliverance! It excited his artist's sense to think of all the further developments through which he might carry that eager, plastic nature. There would be a new Kitty, with new capacities and powers. Wasn't that justification enough? He felt himself a sculptor in the very substance of life, moulding a living creature afresh, disengaging it from harsh and hindering conditions. What was there vile in that?

The argument pursued itself.

"The modern judges for himself—makes his own laws, as a god, knowing good and evil. No doubt in time a new social law will emerge—with new sanctions. Meanwhile, here we are, in a moment of transition, manufacturing new types, exploring new combinations—by which let those who come after profit!"

Little delicate, distinguished thing!—every aspect of her, angry or sweet, sad or wilful, delighted his taste and sense. Moreover, she was *his* deliverance, too—from an ugly and vulgar entanglement of which he was ashamed. He shrank impatiently from memories which every now and then pursued him of the Ricci's coarse beauty and exacting ways. Kitty had just appeared in time! He felt himself rehabilitated in his own eyes. Love may trifle as it pleases with what people call "law"; but there are certain æsthetic limits not to be transgressed.

The Ricci, of course, was wild and thirsting for revenge. Let her! Anxieties far more pressing disturbed

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him. What if he tempted Kitty to this escapade—and the rough life killed her? He saw clearly how frail she was.

But it was the artificiality of her life, the innumerable burdens of civilization, which had brought her to this! Women were not the weaklings they seemed, or believed themselves to be. For many of them, probably for Kitty, a rude and simple life would mean not only fresh mental but fresh physical strength. He had seen what women could endure, for love's or patriotism's sake! Make but appeal to the spirit—the proud and tameless spirit—and how the flesh answered! He knew that his power with Kitty came largely from a certain stoicism, a certain hardness, mingled, as he would prove to her, with a boundless devotion. Let him carry it through—without fears—and so enlarge her being and his own! And as to responsibilities beyond, as to their later lives—let time take care of its own births. For the modern determinist of Cliffe's type there *is* no responsibility. He waits on life, following where it leads, rejoicing in each new feeling, each fresh reaction of consciousness on experience, and so links his fatalist belief to that Nietzsche doctrine of self-development at all costs, and the coming man, in which Cliffe's thought anticipated the years.

Kitty meanwhile listened to his intermittent talk of Venice, or Bosnia, with all its suggestions of new worlds and far horizons, and scarcely said a word.

But through the background of the brain there floated with her, as with him, a procession of unspoken thoughts. She had received three letters from William. Immediately on his arrival he had tendered his resignation.

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Lord Parham had asked him to suspend the matter for ten days. Only the pressure of his friends, it seemed, and the consternation of his party had wrung from Ashe a reluctant consent. Meanwhile, all copies of the book had been bought up; the important newspapers had readily lent themselves to the suppression of the affair; private wraths had been dealt with by conciliatory lawyers; and in general a far more complete hushing-up had been attained than Ashe had ever imagined possible. There was no doubt infinite gossip in the country-houses. But sympathy for Kitty in her grief, for Ashe himself, and Lady Tranmore, had done much to keep it within bounds. The little Dean especially, beloved of all the world, had been incessantly active on behalf of peace and oblivion.

All this Kitty read or guessed from William's letters. After all, then, the harm had not been so great! Why such a panic!—such a hurry to leave her!—when she was ill—and sorry? And now how curtly, how measuredly he wrote! Behind the hopefulness of his tone she read the humiliation and soreness of his mind—and said to herself, with a more headlong conviction than ever, that he would never forgive her.

No, *never!*—and especially now that she had added a thousandfold to the original offence. She had never written to him since his departure. Margaret French, too, was angry with her—had almost broken with her.

They left their boat on the Riva, and walked to the Piazza through the now starry dusk. As they passed the great door of St. Mark's, two persons came out of the church. Kitty recognized Mary Lyster and Sir

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Richard. She bowed slightly; Sir Richard put his hand to his hat in a flurried way; but Mary, looking them both in the face, passed without the smallest sign, unless the scorn in face and bearing might pass for recognition.

Kitty gasped.

"She cut me!" she said, in a shaking voice.

"Oh no!" said Cliffe. "She didn't see you in the dark."

Kitty made no reply. She hurried along the northern side of the Piazza, avoiding the groups which were gathered in the sunset light round the flocks of feeding pigeons, brushing past the tables in front of the cafés, still well filled on this mild evening.

"Take care!" said Cliffe, suddenly, in a low, imperative voice.

Kitty looked up. In her abstraction she saw that she had nearly come into collision with a woman sitting at a café table and surrounded by a noisy group of men.

With a painful start Kitty perceived the mocking eyes of Mademoiselle Ricci. The Ricci said something in Italian, staring the while at the English lady; and the men near her laughed, some furtively, some loudly.

Cliffe's face set. "Walk quickly!" he said in her ear, hurrying her past.

When they had reached one of the narrow streets behind the Piazza, Kitty looked at him—white and haughtily tremulous. "What did that mean?"

"Why should you deign to ask?" was Cliffe's impatient reply. "I have ceased to go and see her. I suppose she guesses why."

"I will have no rivalry with Mademoiselle Ricci!" cried Kitty.

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"You can't help it," said Cliffe, calmly. "The powers of light are always in rivalry with the powers of darkness."

And without further pleading or excuse he stalked on, his gaunt form and striking head towering above the crowded pavement. Kitty followed him with difficulty, conscious of a magnetism and a force against which she struggled in vain.

About a week afterwards Kitty shut herself up one evening in her room to write to Ashe. She had just passed through an agitating conversation with Margaret French, who had announced her intention of returning to England at once, alone, if Kitty would not accompany her. Kitty's hands were trembling as she began to write.

"I am glad — oh! so glad, William — that you *have* withdrawn your resignation — that people have come forward so splendidly, and *made* you withdraw it—that Lord Parham is behaving decently—and that you have been able to get hold of all those copies of the book. I always hoped it would not be quite so bad as you thought. But I know you must have gone through an awful time—and I'm *sorry*.

"William, I want to tell you something—for I can't go on lying to you—or even just hiding the truth. I met Geoffrey Cliffe here—before you left—and I never told you. I saw him first in a gondola the night of the serenata—and then at the Armenian convent. Do you remember my hurrying you and Margaret into the garden? That was to escape meeting him. And that same

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afternoon when I was in the unused rooms of the Palazzo Vercelli—the rooms they show to tourists—he suddenly appeared—and somehow I spoke to him, though I had never meant to do so again.

"Then when you left me I met him again—that afternoon—and he found out I was very miserable and made me tell him everything. I know I had no right to do so—they were your secrets as well as mine. But you know how little I can control myself—it's wretched, but it's true.

"William, I don't know what will happen. I can't make out from Margaret whether she has written to you or not—she won't tell me. If she has, this letter will not be much news to you. But, mind, I write it of my own free will, and not because Margaret may have forced my hand. I should have written it anyway. Poor old darling!—she thinks me mad and bad, and to-night she tells me she can't take the responsibility of looking after me any longer. Women like her can never understand creatures like me—and I don't want her to. She's a dear saint, and as true as steel—not like your Mary Lysters! I could go on my knees to her. But she can't control or save me. Not even you could, William. You've tried your best, and in spite of you I'm going to perdition, and I can't stop myself.

"For, William, there's something broken forever between you and me. I know it was I who did the wrong, and that you had no choice but to leave me when you did. But yet you *did* leave me, though I implored you not. And I know very well that you don't love me as you used to—why should you?—and that you never can love me in the same way again. Every letter you

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write tells me that. And though I have deserved it all, I can't bear it. When I think of coming home to England, and how you would try to be nice to me—how good and dear and magnanimous you would be, and what a beast I should feel—I want to drown myself and have done.

"It all seems to me so hopeless. It is my own nature—the stuff out of which I am cut—that's all wrong. I may promise my breath away that I will be discreet and gentle and well behaved, that I'll behave properly to people like Lady Parham, that I'll keep secrets, and not make absurd friendships with absurd people, that I'll try and keep out of debt, and so on. But what's the use? It's the *will* in me—the something that drives, or ought to drive—that won't work. And nobody ever taught me or showed me, that I can remember, till I met you. In Paris at the Place Vendôme, half the time I used to live with maman and papa, be hideously spoiled, dressed absurdly, eat off silver plate, and make myself sick with rich things—and then for days together maman would go out or away, forget all about me, and I used to storm the kitchen for food. She either neglected me or made a show of me; she was my worst enemy, and I hated and fought her—till I went to the convent at ten. When I was fourteen maman asked a doctor about me. He said I should probably go mad—and at the convent they thought the same. Maman used to throw this at me when she was cross with me.

"Well, I don't repeat this to make you excuse me and think better of me—it's all too late for that—but because I am such a puzzle to myself, and I try to explain things. I *did* love you, William—I believe I do still—

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but when I think of our living together again, my arms drop by my side and I feel like a dead creature. Your life is too great a thing for me. Why should I spoil or hamper it? If you loved me, as you did once—if you still thought *everything* worth while, then, if I had a spark of decency left, I might kill myself to free you, but I should never do—what I may do now. But, William, you'll forget me soon. You'll pass great laws, and make great speeches, and the years when I tormented you—and all my wretched ways—will seem such a small, small thing.

"Geoffrey says he loves me. And I think he does, though how long it will last, or may be worth, no one can tell. As for me, I don't know whether I love him. I have no illusion about him. But there are moments when he absolutely holds me—when my will is like wax in his hands. It is because, I think, of a certain grandness—*grandeur* seems too strong—in his character. It was always there; because no one could write such poems as his without it. But now it's more marked, though I don't know that it makes him a better man. He thinks it does; but we all deceive ourselves. At any rate, he is often superb, and I feel that I could die, if not for him, at least with him. And he is not unlikely to die in some heroic way. He went out as you know simply as correspondent and to distribute relief, but lately he has been fighting for these people—of course he has!—and when he goes back he is to be one of their regular leaders. When he talks of it he is noble, transformed. It reminds me of Byron—his wicked life here—and then his death at Missolonghi. Geoffrey can do such base, cruel things—and yet—

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"But I haven't yet told you. He asks me to go with him, back to the fighting-lines in upper Bosnia. There seems to be a great deal that women can do. I shall wear a nurse's uniform, and probably nurse at a little hospital he founded—high up in one of the mountain valleys. I know this will almost make you laugh. You will think of me, not knowing how to put on a button without Blanche—and wanting to be waited on every moment. But you'll see; there'll be nothing of that sort. I wonder whether it's hardship I've been thirsting for all my life—even when I seemed such a selfish, luxurious little ape?

"At the same time, I think it will kill me—and that would be the best end of all. To have some great, heroic experience, and then—'die upon the midnight with no pain! . . .'

"Oh, if I thought you'd care very, *very* much, I should have pain — horrible pain. But I know you won't. Politics have taken my place. Think of me sometimes, as I was when we were first married—and of Harry—my little, little fellow!

"—Maman and I have had a ghastly scene. She came to scold me for my behavior—to say I was the talk of Venice. *She!* Of course I know what she means. She thinks if I am divorced she will lose her allowance—and she can't bear the thought of that, though Markham Warington is quite rich. My heart just *boiled* within me. I told her it is the poison of her life that works in me, and that whatever I do, *she* has no right to reproach me. Then she cried—and I was like ice—and at last she went. Warington, good fellow, has written to me, and asked to see me. But what is the use?

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"I know you'll leave me the £500 a year that was settled on me. It 'll be so good for me to be poor—and dressed in serge—and trying to do something else with these useless hands than writing books that break your heart. I am giving away all my smart clothes. Blanche is going home. Oh, William, William! I'm going to shut this, and it's like the good-bye of death—a mean and ugly—*death.*

"... Later. They have just brought me a note from Danieli's. So Margaret did write to you, and your mother has come. Why did you send her, William? She doesn't love me—and I shall only stab and hurt her. Though I'll try not—for your sake."

Two days later Ashe received almost by the same post which brought him the letter from Kitty, just quoted, the following letter from his mother:

"My dearest William,—I have seen Kitty. With some difficulty she consented to let me go and see her yesterday evening about nine o'clock.

"I arrived between six and seven, having travelled straight through without a break, except for an hour or two at Milan, and immediately on arriving I sent a note to Margaret French. She came in great distress, having just had a fresh scene with Kitty. Oh, my dear William, her report could not well be worse. Since she wrote to us Kitty seems to have thrown over all precautions. They used to meet in churches or galleries, and go out for long days in the gondola or a fishing-boat together, and Kitty would come home alone and lie on the sofa through the evening, almost without speak-

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ing or moving. But lately he comes in with her, and stays hours, reading to her, or holding her hand, or talking to her in a low voice, and Margaret cannot stop it.

"Yet she has done her best, poor girl! Knowing what we all knew last year, it filled her with terror when she first discovered that he was in Venice and that they had met. But it was not till it had gone on about a week, with the strangest results on Kitty's spirits and nerves, that she felt she must interfere. She not only spoke to Kitty, but she spoke and wrote to him in a very firm, dignified way. Kitty took no notice—only became very silent and secretive. And he treated poor Margaret with a kind of courteous irony which made her blood boil, and against which she could do nothing. She says that Kitty seems to her sometimes like a person moving in sleep—only half conscious of what she is doing; and at others she is wildly excitable, irritable with everybody, and only calming down and becoming reasonable when this man appears.

"There is much talk in Venice. They seem to have been seen together by various London friends who knew—about the difficulties last year. And then, of course, everybody is aware that you are not here—and the whole story of the book goes from mouth to mouth—and people say that a separation has been arranged—and so on. These are the kind of rumors that Margaret hears, especially from Mary Lyster, who is staying in this hotel with her father, and seems to have a good many friends here.

"Dearest William—I have been lingering on these things because it is so hard to have to tell you what

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passed between me and Kitty. Oh! my dear, dear son, take courage. Even now everything is not lost. Her conscience may awaken at the last moment; this bad man may abandon his pursuit of her; I may still succeed in bringing her back to you. But I am in terrible fear —and I must tell you the whole truth.

"Kitty received me alone. The room was very dark —only one lamp that gave a bad light—so that I saw her very indistinctly. She was in black, and, as far as I could see, extremely pale and weary. And what struck me painfully was her haggard, careless look. All the little details of her dress and hair seemed so neglected. Blanche says she is far too irritable and impatient in the mornings to let her hair be done as usual. She just rolls it into one big knot herself and puts a comb in it. She wears the simplest clothes, and changes as little as possible. She says she is soon going to have done with all that kind of thing, and she must get used to it. My own impression is that she is going through great agony of mind—above all, that she is ill—ill in body and soul.

"She told me quite calmly, however, that she had made up her mind to leave you; she said that she had written to you to tell you so. I asked her if it was because she had ceased to love you. After a pause she said 'No.' Was it because some one else had come between you? She threw up her head proudly, and said it was best to be quite plain and frank. She had met Geoffrey Cliffe again, and she meant henceforward to share his life. Then she went into the wildest dreams about going back with him to the Balkans, and nursing in a hospital, and dying—she hopes!—of hard work and privations. And all this in a torrent of words—and her

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eyes blazing, with that look in them as though she saw nothing but the scenes of her own imagination. She talked of devotion—and of forgetting herself in other people. I could only tell her, of course, that all this sounded to me the most grotesque sophistry and perversion. She was forgetting her first duty, breaking her marriage vow, and tearing your life asunder. She shook her head, and said you would soon forget her. 'If he had loved me he would never have left me!' she said, again and again, with a passion I shall never forget.

"Of course that made me very angry, and I described what the situation had been when you reached London —Lord Parham's state of mind—and the consternation caused everywhere by the wretched book. I tried to make her understand what there was at stake—the hopes of all who follow you in the House and the country—the great reforms of which you are the life and soul—your personal and political honor. I impressed on her the endless trouble and correspondence in which you had been involved—and how meanwhile all your Home Office and cabinet work had to be carried on as usual, till it was decided whether your resignation should be withdrawn or no. She listened with her head on her hands. I think with regard to the book she is most genuinely ashamed and miserable. And yet all the time there is this unreasonable, this monstrous feeling that you should not have left her!

"As to the scandalous references to private persons, she said that Madeleine Alcot had written to her about the country-house gossip. That wretched being, Mr. Darrell, seems also to have written to her, trying to save himself through her. And the only time I saw her

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laugh was when she spoke of having had a furious letter from Lady Grosville about the references to Grosville Park. It was like the laugh of a mischievous, unhappy child.

"Then we came back to the main matter, and I implored her to let me take her home. First I gave her your letter. She read it, flushed up, and threw it away from her. 'He commands me!' she said, fiercely. 'But I am no one's chattel.' I replied that you had only summoned her back to her duty and her home, and I asked her if she could really mean to repay your unfailing love by bringing anguish and dishonor upon you? She sat dumb, and her stubbornness moved me so that I fear I lost my self-control and said more, much more—in denunciation of her conduct—than I had meant to do. She heard me out, and then she got up and looked at me very bitterly and strangely. I had never loved her, she said, and so I could not judge her. Always from the beginning I had thought her unfit to be your wife, and she had known it, and my dislike of her, especially during the past year, had made her hard and reckless. It had seemed no use trying. I just wanted her dead, that you might marry a wife who would be a help and not a stumbling-block. Well, I should have my wish, for she would soon be as good as dead, both to you and to me.

"All this hurt me deeply, and I could not restrain myself from crying. I felt so helpless, and so doubtful whether I had not done more harm than good. Then she softened a little, and asked me to let her go to bed —she would think it all over and write to me in the morning. . . .

"So, my dear William, I can only pray and wait. I

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am afraid there is but little hope, but God is merciful and strong. He may yet save us all.

"But whatever happens, remember that you have nothing to reproach yourself with—that you have done all that man could do. I should telegraph to you in the morning to say, 'Come, at all hazards,' but that I feel sure all will be settled to-morrow one way or the other. Either Kitty will start with me—or she will go with Geoffrey Cliffe. You could do nothing—absolutely nothing. God help us! She seems to have some money, and she told me that she counted on retaining her jointure."

On the night following her interview with Lady Tranmore, Kitty went from one restless, tormented dream into another, but towards morning she fell into one of a different kind. She dreamed she was in a country of great mountains. The peaks were snow-crowned, vast glaciers filled the chasms on their flanks, forests of pines clothed the lower sides of the hills, and the fields below were full of spring flowers. She saw a little Alpine village, and a church with an old and slender campanile. A plain stone building stood by—it seemed to be an inn of the old-fashioned sort—and she entered it. The dinner-table was ready in the low-roofed *salle-à-manger*, and as she sat down to eat she saw that two other guests were at the same table. She glanced at them, and perceived that one was William and the other her child, Harry, grown older—and transfigured. Instead of the dull and clouded look which had wrung her heart in the old days, against which she had striven, patiently and impatiently, in vain, the blue eyes were alive with

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mind and affection. It was as if the child beheld his mother for the first time and she him. As he recognized her he gave a cry of joy, waving one hand towards her while with the other he touched his father on the arm. William raised his head. But when he saw his wife his face changed. He rose from his seat, and drawing the little boy into his arms he walked away. Kitty saw them disappear into a long passage, indeterminate and dark. The child's face over his father's shoulder was turned in longing towards his mother, and as he was carried away he stretched out his little hands to her in lamentation.

Kitty woke up bathed in tears. She sprang out of bed and threw the window nearest to her open to the night. The winter night was mild, and a full moon sailed the southern sky. Not a sound on the water, not a light in the palaces; a city of ebony and silver, Venice slept in the moonlight. Kitty gathered a cloak and some shawls round her, and sank into a low chair, still crying and half conscious. At his inn, some few hundred yards away, between her and the Piazzetta, was Geoffrey Cliffe waking too?—making his last preparations? She knew that all his stores were ready, and that he proposed to ship them and the twenty young fellows, Italians and Dalmatians, who were going with him to join the insurgents, that morning, by a boat leaving for Cattaro. He himself was to follow twenty-four hours later, and it was his firm and confident expectation that Kitty would go with him—passing as his wife. And, indeed, Kitty's own arrangements were almost complete, her money in her purse, the clothes she meant to take with her packed in one small trunk,

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some of the Tranmore jewels which she had been recently wearing ready to be returned on the morrow to Lady Tranmore's keeping, other jewels, which she regarded as her own, together with the remainder of her clothes, put aside, in order to be left in the custody of the landlord of the apartment till Kitty should claim them again.

One more day—which would probably see the departure of Margaret French—one more wrestle with Lady Tranmore, and all the links with the old life would be torn away. A bare, stripped soul, dependent henceforth on Geoffrey Cliffe for every crumb of happiness, treading in unknown paths, suffering unknown things, probing unknown passions and excitements—it was so she saw herself; not without that corroding double consciousness of the modern, that it was all very interesting, and as such to be forgiven and admired.

Notwithstanding what she had said to Ashe, she did believe—with a clinging and desperate faith—that Cliffe loved her. Had she really doubted it, her conduct would have been inexplicable, even to herself, and he must have seemed a madman. What else could have induced him to burden himself with a woman on such an errand and at such a time? She had promised, indeed, to be his lieutenant and comrade—and to return to Venice if her health should be unequal to the common task. But in spite of the sternness with which he put that task first—a sternness which was one of his chief attractions for Kitty—she knew well that her coming threw a glamour round it which it had never yet possessed, that the passion she had aroused in him, and the triumph of binding her to his fate, possessed him—for the moment at any rate—heart and soul. He had the

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poet's resources, too, and a mind wherewith to organize and govern. She shrank from him still, but she already envisaged the time when her being would sink into and fuse with his, and like two colliding stars they would flame together to one fiery death.

Thoughts like these ran in her mind. Yet all the time she saw the high mountains of her dream, the old inn, the receding face of her child on William's shoulder; and the tears ran down her cheeks. The letter from William that Lady Tranmore had given her lay on a table near. She took it up, and lit a candle to read it.

"Kitty—I bid you come home. I should have started for Venice an hour ago, after reading Miss French's letter, but that honor and public duty keep me here. But mother is going, and I implore and command you, as your husband, to return with her. Oh, Kitty, have I ever failed you?—have I ever been hard with you?—that you should betray our love like this? Was I hard when we parted—a month ago? If I was, forgive me, I was sore pressed. Come home, you poor child, and you shall hear no reproaches from me. I think I have nearly succeeded in undoing your rash work. But what good will that be to me if you are to use my absence for that purpose to bring us both to ruin? Kitty, the grass is not yet green on our child's grave. I was at Haggart last Sunday, and I went over in the dusk to put some flowers upon it. I thought of you without a moment's bitterness, and prayed for us both, if such as I may pray. Then next morning came Miss French's letter. Kitty, have you no heart—and no conscience? Will

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you bring disgrace on that little grave? Will you dig between us the gulf which is irreparable, across which your hand and mine can never touch each other any more? I cannot and I will not believe it. Come back to me—come back!"

She reread it with a melting heart—with deep, shaking sobs. When she first glanced through it the word "command" had burned into her proud sense; the rest passed almost unnoticed. Now the very strangeness in it as coming from William—the strangeness of its grave and deep emotion—held and grappled with her.

Suddenly—some tension of the whole being seemed to give way. Her head sank back on the chair, she felt herself weak and trembling, yet happy as a soul newborn into a world of light. Waking dreams passed through her brain in a feverish succession, reversing the dream of the night—images of peace and goodness and reunion.

Minutes—hours—passed. With the first light she got up feebly, found ink and paper, and began to write.

From Lady Tranmore to William Ashe:

"Oh! my dearest William—at last a gleam of hope.

"No letter this morning. I was in despair. Margaret reported that Kitty refused to see any one—had locked her door, and was writing. Yet no letter came. I made an attempt to see Geoffrey Cliffe, who is staying at the 'Germania,' but he refused. He wrote me the most audacious letter to say that an interview could only be very painful, that he and Kitty must decide for themselves, that he was waiting every hour for a final word

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from Kitty. It rested with her, and with her only. Coercion in these matters was no longer possible, and he did not suppose that either you or I would attempt it.

"And now comes this blessed note—a respite at least! '*I am going to Verona to-night with Blanche. Please let no one attempt to follow me. I wish to have two days alone—absolutely alone. Wait here. I will write. K.*'

". . . Margaret French, too, has just been here. She was almost hysterical with relief and joy—and you know what a calm, self-controlled person she is. But her dear, round face has grown white, and her eyes behind her spectacles look as though she had not slept for nights. She says that Kitty will not see her. She sent her a note by Blanche to ask her to settle all the accounts, and told her that she should not say good-bye—it would be too agitating for them both. In two days she should hear. Meanwhile the maid Blanche is certainly going with Kitty; and the gondola is ordered for the Milan train this evening.

"Two P.M. There is one thing that troubles me, and I must confess it. I did not see that across Kitty's letter in the corner was written 'Tell *nobody* about this letter.' And Polly Lyster happened to be with me when it came. She has been *au courant* of the whole affair for the last fortnight—that is, as an on-looker. She and Kitty have only met once or twice since Mary reached Venice; but in one way or another she has been extraordinarily well informed. And, as I told you, she came to see me directly I arrived and told me all she knew. You know her old friendship for us, William? She has many weaknesses, and of late I have thought her much changed, grown very hard and bitter. But she is always *very*

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loyal to you and me—and I could not help betraying my feeling when Kitty's note reached me. Mary came and put her arms round me, and I said to her, 'Oh, Mary, thank God!—she's broken with him! She's going to Verona to-night on the way home!' And she kissed me and seemed so glad. And I was very grateful to her for her sympathy, for I am beginning to feel my age, and this has been rather a strain. But I oughtn't to have told her!—or anybody! I see, of course, what Kitty meant. It is incredible that Mary should breathe a word—or if she did that it should reach that man. But I have just sent her a note to Danieli's to warn her in the strongest way.

"Beloved son—if, indeed, we save her—we will be very good to her, you and I. We will remember her bringing up and her inheritance. I will be more loving—more like Christ. I hope He will forgive me for my harshness in the past.... My William!—I love you so! God be merciful to you and to your poor Kitty!"

"Will the signora have her dinner outside or in the *salle-à-manger?*"

The question was addressed to Kitty by a little Italian waiter belonging to the Albergo San Zeno at Verona, who stood bent before her, his white napkin under his arm.

"Out here, please—and for my maid also."

The speaker moved wearily towards the low wall which bounded the foaming Adige, and looked across the river. Far away the Alps that look down on Garda glistened under the stars; the citadel on its hill, the

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houses across the river were alive with lights; to the left the great mediæval bridge rose, a dark, ponderous mass, above the torrents of the Adige. Overhead, the little outside restaurant was roofed with twining vine-stems from which the leaves had fallen; colored lights twinkled among them and on the white tables underneath. The night was mild and still, and a veiled moon was just rising over the town of Juliet.

"Blanche!"

"Yes, my lady?"

"Bring a chair, Blanchie, and come and sit by me."

The little maid did as she was told, and Kitty slipped her hand into hers with a long sigh.

"Are you very tired, my lady?"

"Yes—but don't talk!"

The two sat silent, clinging to each other.

A step on the cobble-stones disturbed them. Blanche looked up, and saw a gentleman issuing from a lane which connected the narrow quay whereon stood the old Albergo San Zeno with one of the main streets of Verona.

There was a cry from Kitty. The stranger paused—looked—advanced. The little maid rose, half fierce, half frightened.

"Go, Blanche, go!" said Kitty, panting; "go back into the hotel."

"Not unless your ladyship wishes me to leave you," said the girl, firmly.

"Go at once!" Kitty repeated, with a peremptory gesture. She herself rose from her seat, and with one hand resting on the table awaited the new-comer. Blanche looked at her—hesitated—and went.

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Geoffrey Cliffe came to Kitty's side. As he approached her his eyes fastened on the loveliness of her attitude, her fair head. In his own expression there was a visionary, fantastic joy; it was the look of the dreamer who, for once, finds in circumstance and the real, poetry adequate and overflowing.

"Kitty!—why did you do this?" he said to her, passionately, as he caught her hand.

Kitty snatched it away, trembling under his look. She began the answer she had devised while he was crossing the flagged quay towards her. But Cliffe paid no heed. He laid a hand on her shoulder, and she sank back powerless into her chair as he bent over her.

"Cruel—cruel child, to play with me so! Did you mean to put me to a last test?—or did your hard little heart misgive you at the last moment? I cross-examined your landlady—I bribed the servants—the gondoliers. Not a word! They were loyal—or you had paid them better. I went back to my hotel in black despair. Oh, you artist!—you plotter! Kitty—you shall pay me this some day! And there—there on my table—all the time—lay your little crumpled note!"

"What note?" she gasped—"what note?"

"Actress!" he said, with an amused laugh.

And cautiously, playfully, lest she should snatch it from him, he unfolded it before her.

Without signature and without date, the soiled half-sheet contained this message, written in Italian and in a disguised handwriting:

"Too many spectators. Come to Verona to-night.
"K."

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Kitty looked at it, and then at the face beside her—infused with a triumphant power and passion. She seemed to shrink upon herself, and her head fell back against one of the supports of the *pergola*. One of the blue lights from above fell with ghastly effect upon the delicate tilted face and closed eyes. Cliffe bent over her in a sharp alarm, and saw that she had fainted away.

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PART V

REQUIESCAT

"Pluck, pluck cypress, O pale maidens,
Dusk the hall with yew!"

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XXIII

"HOW strange!" thought the Dean, as he once more stepped back into the street to look at the front of the Home Secretary's house in Hill Street. "He is certainly in town."

For, according to the *Times*, William Ashe the night before had been hotly engaged in the House of Commons fighting an important bill, of which he was in charge, through committee. Yet the blinds of the house in Hill Street were all drawn, and the Dean had not yet succeeded in getting any one to answer the bell.

He returned to the attack, and this time a charwoman appeared. At sight of the Dean's legs and apron, she dropped a courtesy, or something like one, informing him that they had workmen in the house and Mr. Ashe was "staying with her ladyship."

The Dean took the Tranmores' number in Park Lane and departed thither, not without a sad glance at the desolate hall behind the charwoman and at the darkened windows of the drawing-room overhead. He thought of that May day two years before when he had dropped in to lunch with Lady Kitty; his memory, equally effective whether it summoned the detail of an English chronicle or the features of a face once seen, placed firm and clear before him the long-chinned fellow at Lady Kitty's left, to whose villany that empty

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and forsaken house bore cruel witness. And the little lady herself—what a radiant and ethereal beauty! Ah me! ah me!

He walked on in meditation, his hands behind his back. Even in this May London the little Dean was capable of an abstracted spirit, and he had still much to think over. He had his appointment with Ashe. But Ashe had written—evidently in a press of business—from the House, and had omitted to mention his temporary change of address. The Dean regretted it. He would rather have done his errand with Lady Kitty's injured husband on some neutral ground, and not in Lady Tranmore's house.

At Park Lane, however, he was immediately admitted.

"Mr. Ashe will be down directly, sir," said the butler, as he ushered the visitor into the commodious library on the ground-floor, which had witnessed for so long the death-in-life of Lord Tranmore. But now Lord Tranmore was bedridden up-stairs, with two nurses to look after him, and to judge from the aspect of the tables piled with letters and books, and from the armful of papers which a private secretary carried off with him as he disappeared before the Dean, Ashe was now fully at home in the room which had been his father's.

There was still a fire in the grate, and the small Dean, who was a chilly mortal, stood on the rug looking nervously about him. Lord Tranmore had been in office himself, and the room, with its bookshelves filled with volumes in worn calf bindings, its solid writing-tables and leather sofas, its candlesticks and inkstands of old silver, slender and simple in pattern, its well-worn Tur-

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key carpet, and its political portraits—"the Duke," Johnny Russell, Lord Althorp, Peel, Melbourne—seemed, to the observer on the rug, steeped in the typical habit and reminiscence of English public life.

Well, if the father, poor fellow, had been distinguished in his day, the son had gone far beyond him. The Dean ruminated on a conversation wherewith he had just beguiled his cup of tea at the Athenæum—a conversation with one of the shrewdest members of Lord Parham's cabinet, a "new man," and an enthusiastic follower of Ashe.

"Ashe is magnificent! At last our side has found its leader. Oh! Parham will disappear with the next appeal to the country. He is getting too infirm! Above all, his eyes are nearly gone; his oculist, I hear, gives him no more than six months' sight, unless he throws up. Then Ashe will take his proper place, and if he doesn't make his mark on English history, I'm a Dutchman. Oh! of course that affair last year was an awful business —the two affairs! When Parliament opened in February there were some of us who thought that Ashe would never get through the session. A man so changed, so struck down, I have seldom seen. You remember what a handsome boy he was, up to last year even! Now he's a middle-aged man. All the same, he held on, and the House gave him that quiet sympathy and support that it can give when it likes a fellow. And gradually you could see the life come back into him—and the ambition. By George! he did well in that trade-union business before Easter; and the bill that's on now—it's masterly, the way in which he's piloting it through! The House positively likes to be managed by

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him; it's a sight worthy of our best political traditions. Oh yes, Ashe will go far; and, thank God, that wretched little woman—what has become of her, by-the-way?—has neither crushed his energy nor robbed England of his services. But it was touch and go."

To all of which the Dean had replied little or nothing. But his heart had sunk within him; and the doubtfulness of a certain enterprise in which he was engaged had appeared to him in even more startling colors than before.

However, here he was. And suddenly, as he stood before the fire, he bowed his white head, and said to himself a couple of verses from one of the Psalms for the day:

"Who will lead me into the strong city: who will bring me into Edom?
Oh, be thou our help in trouble: for vain is the help of man."

The door opened, and the Dean straightened himself impetuously, every nerve tightening to its work.

"How do you do, my dear Dean?" said Ashe, enclosing the frail, ascetic hand in both his own. "I trust I have not kept you waiting. My mother was with me. Sit there, please; you will have the light behind you."

"Thank you. I prefer standing a little, if you don't mind—and I like the fire."

Ashe threw himself into a chair and shaded his eyes with his hand. The Dean noticed the strains of gray in his curly hair, and that aspect, as of something withered and wayworn, which had invaded the man's whole personality, balanced, indeed, by an intellectual dignity

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and distinction which had never been so commanding. It was as though the stern and constant wrestle of the mind had burned away all lesser things—the old, easy grace, the old, careless pleasure in life.

"I think you know," began the Dean, clearing his throat, "why I asked you to see me?"

"You wished, I think, to speak to me—about my wife," said Ashe, with difficulty.

Under his sheltering hand, his eyes looked straight before him into the fire.

The Dean fidgeted a moment, lifted a small Greek vase on the mantel-piece, and set it down—then turned round.

"I heard from her ten days ago—the most piteous letter. As you know, I had always a great regard for her. The news of last year was a sharp sorrow to me—as though she had been a daughter. I felt I must see her. So I put myself into the train and went to Venice."

Ashe started a little, but said nothing.

"Or, rather, to Treviso, for, as I think you know, she is there with Lady Alice."

"Yes, that I had heard."

The Dean paused again, then moved a little nearer to Ashe, looking down upon him.

"May I ask—stop me if I seem impertinent—how much you know of the history of the winter?"

"Very little!" said Ashe, in a low voice. "My mother got some information from the English consul at Trieste, who is a friend of hers—to whom, it seems, Lady Kitty applied; but it did not amount to much."

The Dean drew a small note-book from a breast-pocket and looked at some entries in it.

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"They seem to have reached Marinitza in November. If I understood aright, Lady Kitty had no maid with her?"

"No. The maid Blanche was sent home from Verona."

"How Lady Kitty ever got through the journey!—or the winter!" said the Dean, throwing up his hands. "Her health, of course, is irreparably injured. But that she did not die a dozen times over, of hardship and misery, is the most astonishing thing! They were in a wretched village, nearly four thousand feet up, a village of wooden huts, with a wooden hospital. All the winter nearly they were deep in snow, and Lady Kitty worked as a nurse. Cliffe seems to have been away fighting, very often, and at other times came back to rest and see to supplies."

"I understand she passed as his wife?" said Ashe.

The Dean made a sign of reluctant assent.

"They lived in a little house near the hospital. She tells me that after the first two months she began to loathe him, and she moved into the hospital to escape him. He tried at first to melt and propitiate her; but when he found that it was no use, and that she was practically lost to him, he changed his temper, and he might have behaved to her like the tyrant he is but that her hold over the people among whom they were living, both on the fighting-men and the women, had become by this time greater than his own. They adored her, and Cliffe dared not ill-treat her. And so it went on through the winter. Sometimes they were on more friendly terms than at others. I gather that when he showed his dare-devil, heroic side she would relent to

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him, and talk as though she loved him. But she would never go back—to live with him; and that after a time alienated him completely. He was away more and more; and at last she tells me there was a handsome Bosnian girl, and—well, you can imagine the rest. Lady Kitty was so ill in March that they thought her dying, but she managed to write to this consul you spoke of at Trieste, and he sent up a doctor and a nurse. But this you probably know?"

"Yes," said Ashe, hoarsely. "I heard that she was apparently very ill when she reached Treviso, but that she had rallied under Alice's nursing. Lady Alice wrote to my mother."

"Did she tell Lady Tranmore anything of Lady Kitty's state of mind?" said the Dean, after a pause.

Ashe also was slow in answering. At last he said:

"I understand there has been great regret for the past."

"Regret!" cried the Dean. "If ever there was a terrible case of the dealings of God with a human soul—"

He began to walk up and down impetuously, wrestling with emotion.

"Did she give you any explanation," said Ashe, presently, in a voice scarcely audible—"of their meeting at Verona? You know my mother believed—that she had broken with him—that all was saved. Then came a letter from the maid, written at Kitty's direction, to say that she had left her mistress—and they had started for Bosnia."

"No; I tried. But she seemed to shrink with horror from everything to do with Verona. I have always supposed that fellow in some way got the information he

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wanted—bought it no doubt—and pursued her. But that she honestly meant to break with him I have no doubt at all."

Ashe said nothing.

"Think," said the Dean, "of the effect of that man's sudden appearance—of his romantic and powerful personality—your wife alone, miserable—doubting your love for her—"

Ashe raised his hand with a gesture of passion.

"If she had had the smallest love left for me she could have protected herself! I had written to her—she knew—"

His voice broke. The Dean's face quivered.

"My dear fellow—God knows—" He broke off. When he recovered composure he said:

"Let us go back to Lady Kitty. Regret is no word to express what I saw. She is consumed by remorse night and day. She is also still—as far as my eyes can judge—desperately ill. There is probably lung trouble caused by the privations of the winter. And the whole nervous system is shattered."

Ashe looked up. His aspect showed the effect of the words.

"Every provision shall be made for her," he said, in a voice muffled and difficult. "Lady Alice has been told already to spare no expense—to do everything that can be done."

"There is only one thing that can be done for her," said the Dean.

Ashe did not speak.

"There is only one thing that you or any one else could do for her," the Dean repeated, slowly, "and

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that is to love—and forgive her!" His voice trembled.

"Was it her wish that you should come to me?" said Ashe, after a moment.

"Yes. I found her at first very despairing—and extremely difficult to manage. She regretted she had written to me, and neither Lady Alice nor I could get her to talk. But one day"—the old man turned away, looking into the fire, with his back to Ashe, and with difficulty pursued his story—"one day, whether it was the sight of a paralyzed child that used to come to Lady Alice's lace-class, or some impression from the service of the mass to which she often goes in the early mornings with her sister, I don't know, but she sent for me—and —and broke down entirely. She implored me to see you, and to ask you if she might live at Haggart, near the child's grave. She told me that according to every doctor she has seen she is doomed, physically. But I don't think she wants to work upon your pity. She herself declares that she has much more vitality than people think, and that the doctors may be all wrong. So that you are not to take that into account. But if you will so far forgive her as to let her live at Haggart, and occasionally to go and see her, that would be the only happiness to which she could now look forward, and she promises that she will follow your wishes in every respect, and will not hinder or persecute you in any way."

Ashe threw up his hands in a melancholy gesture. The Dean understood it to mean a disbelief in the ability of the person promising to keep such an engagement. His face flushed—he looked uncertainly at Ashe.

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"For my part," he said, quickly, "I am not going to advise you for a moment to trust to any such promise."

Rising from his seat, Ashe began to pace the room. The Dean followed him with his eyes, which kindled more and more.

"But," he resumed, "I none the less urge and implore you to grant Lady Kitty's prayer."

Ashe slightly shook his head. The little Dean drew himself together.

"May I speak to you—with a full frankness? I have known and loved you from a boy. And"—he stopped a moment, then said, simply—"I am a Christian minister."

Ashe, with a sad and charming courtesy, laid his hand on the old man's arm.

"I can only be grateful to you," he said, and stood waiting.

"At least you will understand me," said the Dean. "You are not one of the small souls. Well—here it is! Lady Kitty has been an unfaithful wife. She does not attempt to deny or cover it. But in my belief she loves you still, and has always loved you. And when you married her, you must, I think, have realized that you were running no ordinary risks. The position and antecedents of her mother—the bringing up of the poor child herself—the wildness of her temperament, and the absence of anything like self-discipline and self-control, must surely have made you anxious? I certainly remember that Lady Tranmore was full of fears."

He looked for a reply.

"Yes," said Ashe, "I was anxious. Or, rather, I saw the risks clearly. But I was in love, and I thought that love could do everything."

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The Dean looked at him curiously—hesitated—and at last said:

"Forgive me. Did you take your task seriously enough?—did you give Lady Kitty all the help you might?"

The blue eyes scanned Ashe's face. Ashe turned away, as though the words had touched a sore.

"I know very well," he said, unsteadily, "that I seemed to you and others a weak and self-indulgent fool. All I can say is, it was not in me to play the tutor and master to my wife."

"She was so young, so undisciplined," said the Dean, earnestly. "Did you guard her as you might?"

A touch of impatience appeared in Ashe.

"Do you really think, my dear Dean," he said, as he resumed his walk up and down, "that one human being has, ultimately, any decisive power over another? If so, I am more of a believer in—fate—or liberty—I am not sure which—than you."

The Dean sighed.

"That you were infinitely good and loving to her we all know."

"'Good'—'loving'?" said Ashe, under his breath, with a note of scorn. "I—"

He restrained himself, hiding his face as he hung over the fire.

There was a silence, till the Dean once more placed himself in Ashe's path. "My dear friend—you saw the risks, and yet you took them! You made the vow 'for better, for worse.' My friend, you have, so to speak, lost your venture! But let me urge on you that the obligation remains!"

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"What obligation?"

"The obligation to the life you took into your own hands—to the soul you vowed to cherish," said the Dean, with an apostolic and passionate earnestness.

Ashe stood before him, pale, and charged with resolution.

"That obligation—has been cancelled—by the laws of your own Christian faith, no less than by the ordinary laws of society."

"I do not so read it!" cried the Dean, with vivacity. "Men say so, 'for the hardness of their hearts.' But the divine pity which transformed men's idea of marriage could never have meant to lay it down that in marriage alone there was to be no forgiveness."

"You forget your text," said Ashe, steadily. "'Saving for the cause—'" His voice failed him.

"Permissive!" was the Dean's eager reply—"permissive only. There are cases, I grant you—cases of impenitent wickedness—where the higher law is suspended, finds no chance to act—where relief from the bond is itself mercy and justice. But the higher law is always there. You know the formula—'It was said by them of old time. But *I* say unto you—' And then follows the new law of a new society. And so in marriage. If love has the smallest room to work—if forgiveness can find the narrowest foothold—love and forgiveness are imposed on—demanded of—the Christian! —here as everywhere else. Love and forgiveness—*not* penalty and hate!"

"There is no question of hate — and — I doubt whether I am a Christian," said Ashe, quietly, turning away.

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The Dean looked at him a little askance—breathing fast.

"But you are a *heart*, William!" he said, using the privilege of his white hairs, speaking as he might have spoken to the Eton boy of twenty years before—"ay, and one of the noblest. You gathered that poor thing into your arms—knowing what were the temptations of her nature, and she became the mother of your child. Now—alas! those temptations have conquered her. But she still turns to you—she still clings to you—and she has no one else. And if you reject her she will go down unforgiven and despairing to the grave."

For the first time Ashe's lips trembled. But his speech was very quiet and collected.

"I must try and explain myself," he said. "Why should we talk of forgiveness? It is not a word that I much understand, or that means much to men of my type and generation. I see what has happened in this way. Kitty's conduct last year hit me desperately hard. It destroyed my private happiness, and but for the generosity of the best friends ever man had it would have driven me out of public life. I warned her that the consequences of the Cliffe matter would be irreparable, and she still carried it through. She left me for that man—and at a time when by her own action it was impossible for me to defend either her or myself. What course of action remained to me? I *did* remember her temperament, her antecedents, and the certainty that this man, whatever might be his moments of heroism, was a selfish and incorrigible brute in his dealings with women. So I wrote to her, through this same consul at Trieste. I let her know that if she wished it, and

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if there were any chance of his marrying her, I would begin divorce proceedings at once. She had only to say the word. If she did not wish it, I would spare her and myself the shame and scandal of publicity. And if she left him, I would make additional provision for her which would insure her every comfort. She never sent a word of reply, and I have taken no steps. But as soon as I heard she was at Treviso, I wrote again—or, rather, this time my lawyers wrote, suggesting that the time had come for the extra provision I had spoken of, which I was most ready and anxious to make."

He paused.

"And this," said the Dean, "is all? This is, in fact, your answer to me?"

Ashe made a sign of assent.

"Except," he added, with emotion, "that I have heard, only to-day, that if Kitty wishes it, her old friend Miss French will go out to her at once, nurse her, and travel with her as long as she pleases. Miss French's brother has just married, and she is at liberty. She is most deeply attached to Kitty, and as soon as she heard Lady Alice's report of her state she forgot everything else. Can you not persuade — Kitty" — he looked up urgently—"to accept her offer?"

"I doubt it," said the Dean, sadly. "There is only one thing she pines for, and without it she will be a sick child crossed. Ah! well—well! So to allow her to share your life again—however humbly and intermittently—is impossible?"

It seemed to the Dean that a shudder passed through the man beside him.

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"Impossible," said Ashe, sharply. "But not only for private reasons."

"You mean your public duty stands in the way?"

"Kitty left me of her own free will. I have put my hand to the plough again—and I cannot turn back. You can see for yourself that I am not at my own disposal—I belong to my party, to the men with whom I act, who have behaved to me with the utmost generosity."

"Of course Lady Kitty could no longer share your public life. But at Haggart—in seclusion?"

"You know what her personality is—how absorbing—how impossible to forget! No—if she returned to me, on any terms whatever, all the old conditions would begin again. I should inevitably have to leave politics."

"And that—you are not prepared to do?"

The Dean wondered at his own audacity, and a touch of proud surprise expressed itself in Ashe.

"I should have preferred to put it that I have accepted great tasks and heavy responsibilities—and that I am not my own master."

The Dean watched him closely. Across the field of imagination there passed the figure of one who "went away sorrowful, having great possessions," and his heart—the heart of a child or a knight-errant—burned within him.

But before he could speak again the door of the room opened and a lady in black entered. Ashe turned towards her.

"Do you forbid me, William?" she said, quietly—"or may I join your conversation?"

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Ashe held out his hand and drew her to him. Lady Tranmore greeted her old friend the Dean, and he looked at her overcome with emotion and doubt.

"You have come to us at a critical moment," he said —"and I am afraid you are against me."

She asked what they had been discussing, though, indeed, as she said, she partly guessed. And the Dean, beginning to be shaken in his own cause, repeated his pleadings with a sinking heart. They sounded to him stranger and less persuasive than before. In doing what he had done he had been influenced by an instinctive feeling that Ashe would not treat the wrong done him as other men might treat it; that, to put it at the least, he would be able to handle it with an ethical originality, to separate himself in dealing with it from the mere weight of social tradition. Yet now as he saw the faces of mother and son together—the mother leaning on the son's arm—and realized all the strength of the social ideas which they represented, even though, in Ashe's case, there had been a certain individual flouting of them, futile and powerless in the end—the Dean gave way.

"There—there!" he said, as he finished his plea, and Lady Tranmore's sad gravity remained untouched. "I see you both think me a dreamer of dreams!"

"Nay, dear friend!" said Lady Tranmore, with the melancholy smile which lent still further beauty to the refined austerity of her face; "these things seem possible to you, because you are the soul of goodness—"

"And a pious old fool to boot!" said the Dean, impatiently. "But I am willing—like St. Paul and my betters—to be a fool for Christ's sake. Lady Tranmore, are you or are you not a Christian?"

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"I hope so," she said, with composure, while her cheek flushed. "But our Lord did not ask impossibilities. He knew there were limits to human endurance—and human pardon—though there might be none to God's."

"'Be ye perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,'" cried the Dean. "Where are the limits there?"

"There are other duties in life besides that to a wife who has betrayed her husband," she said, steadily. "You ask of William what he has not the strength to give. His life was wrecked, and he has pieced it together again. And now he has given it to his country. That poor, guilty child has no claim upon it."

"But understand," said Ashe, interposing, with an energy that seemed to express the whole man—"while I live, *everything*—short of what you ask—that can be done to protect or ease her, shall be done. Tell her that."

His features worked painfully. The Dean took up his hat and stick.

"And may I tell her, too," he said, pausing—"that you forgive her?"

Ashe hesitated.

"I do not believe," he said, at last, "that she would attach any more meaning to that word than I do. She would think it unreal. What's done is done."

The Dean's heart leaped up in the typical Christian challenge to the fatal and the irrevocable. While life lasts the lost sheep can always be sought and found; and love, the mystical wine, can always be poured into the wounds of the soul, healing and recreating! But he said no more. He felt himself humiliated and defeated.

Ashe and Lady Tranmore took leave of him with an

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extreme gentleness and affection. He would almost rather they had treated him ill. Yes, he was an optimist and a dreamer!—one who had, indeed, never grappled in his own person with the worst poisons and corrosions of the soul. Yet still, as he passed along the London streets—marked here and there by the newspaper placards which announced Ashe's committee triumphs of the night before—he was haunted anew by the immortal words:

"One thing thou lackest," . . . and "Come, follow me!"

Ah!—could he have done such a thing himself? or was he merely the scribe carelessly binding on other men's shoulders things grievous to be borne? The answering passion of his faith mounted within him—joined with a scorn for the easy conditions and happy, scholarly pursuits of his own life, and a thirst which in the early days of Christendom would have been a thirst for witness and for martyrdom.

Three days later the Dean—a somewhat shrunken and diminished figure, in ordinary clerical dress, without the buckles and silk stockings that typically belonged to him—stood once more at the entrance of a small villa outside the Venetian town of Treviso.

He was very weary, and as he sought disconsolately through all his pockets for the wherewithal to pay his fly, while the spring rain pattered on his wide-awake, he produced an impression as of some delicate, draggled thing, which would certainly have gone to the heart of his adoring wife could she have beheld it. The Dean's

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ways were not sybaritic. He pecked at food and drink like a bird; his clothes never caused him a moment's thought; and it seemed to him a waste of the night to use it for sleeping. But none the less did he go through life finely looked after. Mrs. Winston dressed him, took his tickets and paid his cabs, and without her it was an arduous matter for the Dean to arrive at any destination whatever. As it was, in the journey from Paris he had lost one of the two bags which Mrs. Winston had packed for him, and he looked remorsefully at the survivor as it was deposited on the steps beside him.

It did not, however, remain on the steps. For when Lady Alice's maid-housekeeper appeared, she informed the Dean, with a certain flurry of manner, that the ladies were not at home. They had gone off that morning—suddenly—to Venice, leaving a letter for him, should he arrive.

"*Fermate!*" cried the Dean, turning towards the cab, which was trailing away, and the man, who had been scandalously overpaid, came back with alacrity, while the Dean stepped in to read the letter.

When he came out again he was very pale and in a great haste. He bade the man replace the bag and drive him at once to the railway-station.

On the way thither he murmured to himself, "Horrible!—horrible!"—and both the letter and a newspaper which had been enclosed in it shook in his hands.

He had half an hour to wait before the advent of the evening train for Venice, and he spent it in a quiet corner poring over the newspaper. And not that newspaper only, for he presently became aware that all the small, ill-printed sheets offered him by an old newsvender

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in the station were full of the same news, and some with later detail—nay, that the people walking up and down in the station were eagerly talking of it.

An Englishman had been assassinated in Venice. It seemed that a body had been discovered early on the preceding morning floating in one of the small canals connecting the Fondamente Nuove with the Grand Canal. It had been stabbed in three places; two of the wounds must have been fatal. The papers in the pocket identified the murdered man as the famous English traveller, poet, and journalist, Mr. Geoffrey Cliffe. Mr. Cliffe had just returned from an arduous winter in the Balkans, where he had rendered superb service to the cause of the Bosnian insurgents. He was well known in Venice, and the terrible event had caused a profound sensation there. No clew to the outrage had yet been obtained. But Mr. Cliffe's purse and watch had not been removed.

The Dean arrived in Venice by the midnight train, and went to the hotel on the Riva whither Lady Alice had directed him. She was still up, waiting to see him, and in the dark passage outside Kitty's door she told him what she knew of the murder. It appeared that late that night a startling arrest had been made—of no less a person than the Signorina Ricci, the well-known actress of the Apollo Theatre, and of two men supposed to have been hired by her for the deed. This news was still unknown to Kitty—she was in bed, and her companion had kept it from her.

"How is she?" asked the Dean.

"Frightfully excited—or else dumb. She let me give her something to make her sleep. Strangely enough,

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she said to me this morning on the way from Treviso: 'It is a woman—and I know her!'"

The following day, when the Dean entered the dingy hotel sitting-room, a thin figure in black came hurriedly out of the bedroom beside it, and Kitty caught him by the hand.

"Isn't it horrible?" she said, staring at him with her changed, dark-rimmed eyes. "She tried once, in Bosnia. One of the Italians who came out with us—she had got hold of him. Do you think—he suffered?"

Her voice was quite quiet. The Dean shuddered.

"One of the stabs was in the heart," he said. "But try and put it from you, Lady Kitty. Sit down." He touched her gently on the shoulder.

Kitty nodded.

"Ah, then," she said—"*then* he couldn't have suffered—could he? I'm glad."

She let the Dean put her in a chair, and, clasping her hands round her knees, she seemed to pursue her own thoughts.

Her aspect affected him almost beyond bearing. Ashe's brilliant wife?—London's spoiled child?—this withered, tragic little creature, of whom it was impossible to believe that, in years, she was not yet twenty-four? So bewildered in mind, so broken in nerve was she, that it was not till he had sat with her some time, now entering perforce into the cloud of horror that brooded over her, now striving to drag her from it, that she asked him about his visit to England.

He told her in a faltering voice.

She received it very quietly, even with a little, queer, twisting laugh.

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"I thought he wouldn't. Was Lady Tranmore there?"

The Dean replied that Lady Tranmore had been there.

"Ah, then, of course there was no chance," said Kitty. "When one is as good as that, one never forgives."

She looked up quickly. "Did William say he forgave me?"

The Dean hesitated.

"He said a great deal that was kind and generous."

A slight spasm passed over Kitty's face.

"I suppose he thought it ridiculous to talk of forgiving. So did I—once."

She covered her eyes with her hands—removing them to say, impatiently:

"One can't go on being sorry every moment of the day. No, one can't! Why are we made so? William would agree with me there."

"Dear Lady Kitty!" said the Dean, tenderly—"God forgives—and with Him there is always hope, and fresh beginning."

Kitty shook her head.

"I don't know what that means," she said. "I wonder whether"—she looked at him with a certain piteous and yet affectionate malice—"if you'd been as deep as I, whether *you*'d know."

The Dean flushed. The hidden wound stung again. Had he, then, no right to speak? He felt himself the elder son of the parable—and hated himself anew.

But he was a Christian, on his Master's business. He must obey orders, even though he could feel no satisfaction, or belief in himself—though he seem to himself such a shallow and perfunctory person. So he did his tender best for Kitty. He spent his loving, enthusias-

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tic, pitiful soul upon her; and while he talked to her she sat with her hands crossed on her lap, and her eyes wandering through the open window to the forests of masts outside and the dancing wavelets of the lagoon. When at last he spoke of the further provision Ashe wished to make for her, when he implored her to summon Margaret French, she shook her head. "I must think what I shall do," she said, quietly; and a minute afterwards, with a flash of her old revolt—"He cannot prevent my going to Harry's grave!"

Early the following morning the murdered man was carried to the cemetery at San Michele. In spite of some attempt on the part of the police to keep the hour secret, half Venice followed the black-draped barca, which bore that flawed poet and dubious hero to his rest.

It was a morning of exceeding beauty. On the mean and solitary front of the Casa dei Spiriti there shone a splendor of light; the lagoon was azure and gold; the main-land a mist of trees in their spring leaf; while far away the cypresses of San Francesco, the slender tower of Torcello, and the long line of Murano—and farther still the majestic wall of silver Alps—greeted the eyes that loved them, as the ear is soothed by the notes of a glorious and yet familiar music.

Amid the crowd of gondolas that covered the shallow stretch of lagoon between the northernmost houses of Venice and the island graveyard, there was one which held two ladies. Alice Wensleydale was there against her will, and her pinched and tragic face showed her repulsion and irritation. She had endeavored in vain to dissuade Kitty from coming; but in the end she had

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insisted on accompanying her. Possibly, as the boat glided over the water amid a crowd of laughing, chattering Italians, the silent Englishwoman was asking herself what was to be the future of the trust she had taken on herself. Kitty in her extremity had remembered her half-sister's promise, and had thrown herself upon it. But a few weeks' experience had shown that they were strange and uncongenial to each other. There was no true affection between them—only a certain haunting instinct of kindred. And even this was weakened or embittered by those memories in Alice's mind which Kitty could never approach and Alice never forget. What was she to do with her half-sister, stranded and dishonored as she was?—How content or comfort her?—How live her own life beside her?

Kitty sat silent, her eyes fixed upon the barca which held the coffin under its pall. Her mind was the scene of an infinite number of floating and fragmentary recollections; of the day when she and Cliffe had followed the *murazzi* towards the open sea; of the meeting at Verona; of the long winter, with its hardship and its horror; and that hatred and contempt which had sprung up between them. Could she love no one, cling faithfully to no one? And now the restless brain, the vast projects, the mixed nature, the half-greatness of the man had been silenced—crushed—in a moment, by the stroke of a knife. He had been killed by a jealous woman—because of his supposed love for another woman, whose abhorrence, in truth, he had earned in a few short weeks. There was something absurd mingled with the horror—as though one watched the prank of a demon.

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Her sensuous nature was tormented by the thought of the last moment. Had he had time to feel despair—the thirst for life? She prayed not. She thought of the Sunday afternoon at Grosville Park when they had tried to play billiards, and Lord Grosville had come down on them; or she saw him sitting opposite to her, at supper, on the night of the fancy ball, in the splendid Titian dress, while she gloated over the thoughts of the trick she had played on Mary Lyster—or bending over her when she woke from her swoon at Verona. Had she ever really loved him for one hour?—and if not, what possible excuse, before gods or men, was there for this ugly, self-woven tragedy into which she had brought herself and him, merely because her vanity could not bear that William had not been able to love her, for long, far above all her deserts?

William! Her heart leaped in her breast. He was thirty-six—and she not twenty-four. A strange and desolate wonder overtook her as the thought seized her of the years they might still spend on the same earth—members of the same country, breathing the same air—and yet forever separate. Never to see him—or speak to him again!—the thought stirred her imagination, as it were, while it tortured her; there was in it a certain luxury and romance of pain.

Thus, as she followed Cliffe to his last blood-stained rest, did her mind sink in dreams of Ashe—and in the dismal reckoning up of all that she had so lightly and inconceivably lost. Sometimes she found herself absorbed in a kind of angry marvelling at the strength of the old moral commonplaces.

It had been so easy and so exciting to defy them.

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Stones which the builders of life reject—do they still avenge themselves in the old way? There was a kind of rage in the thought.

On the way home Kitty expressed a wish to go into St. Mark's alone. Lady Alice left her there, and in the shadow of the atrium Kitty looked at her strangely, and kissed her.

An hour after Lady Alice had reached the hotel a letter was brought to her. In it Kitty bade her—and the Dean—farewell, and asked that no effort should be made to track her. "I am going to friends—where I shall be safe and at peace. Thank you both with all my heart. Let no one think about me any more."

Of course they disobeyed her. They made what search in Venice they could, without rousing a scandal, and Ashe rushed out to join it, using the special means at a minister's disposal. But it was fruitless. Kitty vanished like a wraith in the dawn; and the living world of action and affairs knew her no more.

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XXIV

"WELL, I must have a carriage!" said William Ashe to the landlord of one of the coaching inns of Domo Dossola—"and if you can't give me one for less, I suppose I shall have to pay this most ridiculous charge. Tell the man to put to at once."

The landlord who owned the carriages, and would be sitting snugly at home while the peasant on the box faced the elements in consideration of a large number of extra francs to his master, retired with a deferential smile, and told Emilio to bring the horses.

Meanwhile Ashe finished an indifferent dinner, paid a large bill, and went out to survey the preparations for departure, so far as the pelting rain in the court-yard would let him. He was going over the Simplon, starting rather late in the day, and the weather was abominable. His valet, Richard Dell, kept watch over the luggage and encouraged the ostlers, with a fairly stoical countenance. He was an old traveller, and though he would have preferred not to travel in a deluge, he disliked Italy, as a country of sour wine, and would be glad to find himself across the Alps. Moreover, he knew the decision of his master's character, and, being a man of some ability and education, he took a pride in the loftiness of the affairs on which Ashe was generally engaged. If Mr. Ashe said that he *must* get to Geneva

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the following morning, and to London the morning after, on important business—why, he *must*, and it was no good talking about weather.

They rattled off through the streets of Domo Dossola, Dell in front with the driver, under a waterproof hood and apron, Ashe in the closed landau behind, with a plentiful supply of books, newspapers, and cigars to while away the time.

At Isella, the frontier village, he took advantage of the custom-house formalities and of a certain lull in the storm to stroll a little in front of the inn. On the Italian side, looking east, there was a certain wild lifting of the clouds, above the lower course of the stream descending from the Gondo ravine; upon the distant meadows and mountain slopes that marked the opening of the Tosa valley, storm-lights came and went, like phantom deer chased by the storm-clouds; beside him the swollen river thundered past, seeking a thirsty Italy; and behind, over the famous Gondo cleft, lay darkness, and a pelting tumult of rain.

Ashe turned back to the carriage, bidding a silent farewell to a country he did not love—a country mainly significant to him of memories which rose like a harsh barrier between his present self and a time when he, too, fleeted life carelessly, like other men, and found every hour delightful. Never, as long as he lived, should he come willingly to Italy. But his mother this year had fallen into such an exhaustion of body and mind, caused by his father's long agony, that he had persuaded her to let him carry her over the Alps to Stresa—a place she had known as a girl and of which she often spoke—for a Whitsuntide holiday. He himself was no longer in

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office. A coalition between the Tories and certain dissident Liberals had turned out Lord Parham's government in the course of a stormy autumn session, some eight months before. It had been succeeded by a weak administration, resting on two or three loosely knit groups—with Ashe as leader of the Opposition. Hence his comparative freedom, and the chance to be his mother's escort.

But at Stresa he had been overtaken by some startling political news—news which seemed to foreshadow an almost immediate change of ministry; and urgent telegrams bade him return at once. The coalition on which the government relied had broken down; the resignation of its chief, a "transient and embarrassed phantom," was imminent; and it was practically certain, in the singular dearth of older men on his own side, since the retirement of Lord Parham, that within a few weeks, if not days, Ashe would be called upon to form an administration. . . .

The carriage was soon on its way again, and presently, in the darkness of the superb ravine that stretches west and north from Gondo, the tumult of wind and water was such that even Ashe's slackened pulses felt the excitement of it. He left the carriage, and, wrapped in a waterproof cape, breasted the wind along the water's edge. Wordsworth's magnificent lines in the "Prelude," dedicated to this very spot, came back to him, as to one who in these later months had been able to renew some of the literary habits and recollections of earlier years.

"—Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light!"

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But here on this wild night were only tumult and darkness; and if Nature in this aspect were still to be held, as Wordsworth makes her, the Voice and Apocalypse of God, she breathed a power pitiless and terrible to man. The fierce stream below, the tiny speck made by the carriage and horses straining against the hurricane of wind, the forests on the farther bank climbing to endless heights of rain, the flowers in the rock crannies lashed and torn, the gloom and chill which had thus blotted out a June evening: all these impressions were impressions of war, of struggle and attack, of forces unfriendly and overwhelming.

A certain restless and melancholy joy in the challenge of the storm, indeed, Ashe felt, as many another strong man has felt before him, in a similar emptiness of heart. But it was because of the mere provocation of physical energy which it involved; not, as it would have been with him in youth, because of the infinitude and vastness of nature, breathing power and expectation into man:

> "Effort, and expectation and desire—
> And something evermore about to be!"

He flung the words upon the wind, which scattered them as soon as they were uttered, merely that he might give them a bitter denial, reject for himself, now and always, the temper they expressed. He had known it well, none better!—gone to bed, and risen up with it—the mere joy in the "mere living." It had seasoned everything, twined round everything, great and small—a day's trout-fishing or deer-stalking; a new book, a friend, a famous place; then politics, and the joys of power.

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Gone! Here he was, hurrying back to England, to take perhaps in his still young hand the helm of her vast fortunes; and of all the old "expectation and desire," the old passion of hope, the old sense of the magic that lies in things unknown and ways untrodden, he seemed to himself now incapable. He would do his best, and without the political wrestle life would be too trifling to be borne; but the relish and the savor were gone, and all was gray.

Ah!—he remembered one or two storm-walks with Kitty in their engaged or early married days—in Scotland chiefly. As he trudged up this Swiss pass he could see stretches of Scotch heather under drifting mist, and feel a little figure in its tweed dress flung suddenly by the wind and its own soft will against his arm. And then, the sudden embrace, and the wet, fragrant cheek, and her voice—mocking and sweet!

Oh, God! where was she now? The shock of her disappearance from Venice had left in some ways a deeper mark upon him than even the original catastrophe. For who that had known her could think of such a being, alone, in a world of strangers, without a peculiar dread and anguish? That she was alive he knew, for her five hundred a year—and she had never accepted another penny from him since her flight—was still drawn on her behalf by a banking firm in Paris. His solicitors, since the failure of their first efforts to trace her after Cliffe's death, had made repeated inquiries; Ashe had himself gone to Paris to see the bankers in question. But he was met by their solemn promise to Kitty to keep her secret inviolate. Madame

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d'Estrées supplied him with the name of the convent in which Kitty had been brought up; but the mother superior denied all knowledge of her. Meanwhile no course of action on Kitty's part could have restored her so effectually to her place in Ashe's imagination. She haunted his days and nights. So also did his memory of the Dean's petition. Insensibly, without argument, the whole attitude of his mind thereto had broken down; since he had been out of office, and his days and nights were no longer absorbed in the detail of administration and Parliamentary leadership, he had been the defenceless prey of grief; yearning and pity and agonized regret, rising from the deep subconscious self, had overpowered his first recoil and determination; and in the absence of all other passionate hope, the one desire and dream which still lived warm and throbbing at his heart was the dream that still in some crowd, or loneliness, he might again, before it was too late, see Kitty's face and the wildness of Kitty's eyes.

And he believed much the same process had taken place in his mother's feeling. She rarely spoke of Kitty; but when she did the doubt and soreness of her mind were plain. Her own life had grown very solitary. And in particular the old friendship between her and Polly Lyster had entirely ceased to be. Lady Tranmore shivered when she was named, and would never herself speak of her if she could help it. Ashe had tried in vain to make her explain herself. Surely it was incredible that she could in any way blame Mary for the incident at Verona? Ashe, of course, remembered the passage in his mother's letter from Venice, and they had the maid Blanche's report to Lady Tranmore, of Kitty's inten-

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tions when she left Venice, of her terror when Cliffe appeared—of her swoon. But he believed with the Dean that any treacherous servant could have brought about the catastrophe. Vincenzo, one of the gondoliers who took Kitty to the station, had seen the luggage labelled for Verona; no doubt Cliffe had bribed him; and this explanation was, indeed, suggested to Lady Tranmore by the maid. His mother's suspicion—if indeed she entertained it—was so hideous that Ashe, finding it impossible to make his own mind harbor it for an instant, was harrowed by the mere possibility of its existence; as though it represented some hidden sore of consciousness that refused either to be probed or healed.

As he labored on against the storm all thought of his present life and activities dropped away from him; he lived entirely in the past. "What is it in me," he thought, "that has made the difference between my life and that of other men I know—that weakened me so with Kitty?" He canvassed his own character, as a third person might have done.

The Christian, no doubt, would say that his married life had failed because God had been absent from it, because there had been in it no consciousness of higher law, of compelling grace.

Ashe pondered what such things might mean. "The Christian—in speculative belief—fails under the challenge of life as often as other men. Surely it depends on something infinitely more primitive and fundamental than Christianity?—something out of which Christianity itself springs? But this something—does it really exist—or am I only cheating myself by fancying it? Is it, as all the sages have said, the pursuit of some

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eternal good, the identification of the self with it—the 'dying to live'? And is this the real meaning at the heart of Christianity?—at the heart of all religion?—the everlasting meaning, let science play what havoc it please with outward forms and statements?"

Had he, perhaps, *doubted the soul?*

He groaned aloud. "O my God, what matter that *I* should grow wise—if Kitty is lost and desolate?"

And he trampled on his own thoughts—feeling them a mere hypocrisy and offence.

As they left the Gondo ravine and began to climb the zigzag road to the Simplon inn, the storm grew still wilder, and the driver, with set lips and dripping face, urged his patient beasts against a deluge. The road ran rivers; each torrent, carefully channelled, that passed beneath it brought down wood and soil in choking abundance; and Ashe watched the downward push of the rain on the high, exposed banks above the carriage. Once they passed a fragment of road which had been washed away; the driver pointing to it said something sulkily about "*frane*" on the "other side."

This bad moment, however, proved to be the last and worst, and when they emerged upon the high valley in which stands the village of Simplon, the rain was already lessening and the clouds rolling up the great sides and peaks of the Fletschhorn. Ashe promised himself a comparatively fine evening and a rapid run down to Brieg.

Outside the old Simplon posting-house, however, they presently came upon a crowd of vehicles of every description, of which the drivers were standing in groups with dripping rugs across their shoulders—shouting and gesticulating.

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And as they drove up the news was thundered at them in every possible tongue. Between the hospice and Bérizal two hundred metres of road had been completely washed away. The afternoon diligence had just got through by a miracle an hour before the accident occurred; before anything else could pass it would take at least ten or twelve hours' hard work, through the night, before the laborers now being requisitioned by the commune could possibly provide even a temporary passage.

Ashe in despair went into the inn to speak with the landlord, and found that unless he was prepared to abandon books and papers, and make a push for it over mountain paths covered deep in fresh snow, there was no possible escape from the dilemma. He must stay the night. The navvies were already on their way; and as soon as ever the road was passable he should know. For not even a future Prime Minister of England could Herr Ludwig do more.

He and Dell went gloomily up the narrow stone stairs of the inn to look at the bedrooms, which were low-roofed and primitive, penetrated everywhere by the roar of a stream which came down close behind the inn. Through the open door of one of the rooms Ashe saw the foaming mass, framed as it were in a window, and almost in the house.

He chose two small rooms looking on the street, and bade Dell get a fire lit in one of them, a bed moved out, an arm-chair moved in, and as large a table set for him as the inn could provide, while he took a stroll before dinner. He had some important letters to answer, and he pointed out to Dell the bag which contained them.

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Then he stepped out into the muddy street, which was still a confusion of horses, vehicles, and men, and, turning up a path behind the inn, was soon in solitude. An evening of splendor! Nature was still in a tragic, declamatory mood—sending piled thunder-clouds of dazzling white across a sky extravagantly blue, and throwing on the high snow-fields and craggy tops a fierce, flame-colored light. The valley was resonant with angry sound, and the village, now in shadow, with its slender, crumbling campanile, seemed like a cowering thing over which the eagle has passed.

The grandeur and the freshness, the free, elemental play of stream and sky and mountain, seized upon a man in whom the main impulses of life were already weary, and filled him with an involuntary physical delight. He noticed the flowers at his feet, in the drenched grass which was already lifting up its battered stalks, and along the margins of the streams—deep blue colombines, white lilies, and yellow anemones. Incomparable beauty lived and breathed in each foot of pasture; and when he raised his eyes from the grass they fed on visionary splendors of snow and rock, stretching into the heavens.

No life visible—except a line of homing cattle, led by a little girl wi h tucked-up skirt and bare feet. And—in the distance—the slender figure of a woman walking—stopping often to gather a flower—or to rest? Not a woman of the valley, clearly. No doubt a traveller, weather-bound like himself at the inn. He watched the figure a little, for some vague grace of movement that seemed to enter into and make a part of that high beauty in which the scene was steeped; but it disappeared behind a fold of pasture, and he did not see it again.

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In spite of the multitude of vehicles gathered about the inn there were not so many guests in the *salle-à-manger*, when Ashe entered it, as he had expected. He supposed that a majority of these vehicles must be return carriages from Brieg. Still there was much clatter of talk and plates, and German seemed to be the prevailing tongue. Except for a couple whom Ashe took to be a Genevese professor and his wife, there was no lady in the room.

He lingered somewhat late at table, toying with his orange, and reading a *Journal de Genève*, captured from a neighbor, which contained an excellent "London letter." The room emptied. The two Swiss handmaidens came in to clear away soiled linen and arrange the tables for the morning's coffee. Only, at a farther table, a *couvert* for one person, set by itself, remained still untouched.

He happened to be alone in the room when the door again opened and a lady entered. She did not see him behind his newspaper, and she walked languidly to the farther table and sat down. As she did so she was seized with a fit of coughing, and when it was over she leaned her head on her hands, gasping.

Ashe had half risen—the newspaper was crushed in his hand—when the Swiss waitress whom the men of the inn called Fräulein Anna—who was, indeed, the daughter of the landlord—came back.

"How are you, madame?" she said, with a smile, and in a slow English of which she was evidently proud.

"I'm better to-day," said the other, hastily. "I shall start to-morrow. What a noise there is to-night!" she added, in a tone both fretful and weary.

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"We are so full—it is the accident to the road, madame. Will madame have a *thé complet* as before?"

The lady nodded, and Fräulein Anna, who evidently knew her ways, brought in the tea at once, stayed chatting beside her for a minute, and then departed, with a long, disapproving look at the gentleman in the corner who was so long over his coffee and would not let her clear away.

Ashe made a fierce effort to still the thumping in his breast and decide what he should do. For the guests there was only one door of entrance or exit, and to reach it he must pass close beside the new-comer.

He laid down his newspaper. She heard the rustling, and involuntarily looked round.

There was a slight sound—an exclamation. She rose. He heard and saw her coming, and sat tranced and motionless, his eyes bent upon her. She came tottering, clinging to the chairs, her hand on her side, till she reached the corner where he was.

"William!" she said, with a little, glad sob, under her breath—"William!"

He himself could not speak. He stood there gazing at her, his lips moving without sound. It seemed to him that she turned her head a moment, as though to look for some one beside him—with an exquisite tremor of the mouth.

"Isn't it strange?" she said, in the same guarded voice. "I had a dream once—a valley—and mountains—and an inn. You sat here—just like this—and—"

She put up her hands to her eyes a moment, shivered, and withdrew them. From her expression she seemed

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to be waiting for him to speak. He moved and stood beside her.

"Where can we talk?" he said, with difficulty.

She shook her head vaguely, looking round her with that slight frown, complaining and yet sweet, which was like a touch of fire on memory.

The waitress came back into the room.

"It *is* odd to have met you here!" said Kitty, in a laughing voice. "Let us go into the *salon de lecture*. The maids want to clear away. Please bring your newspaper."

Fräulein Anna looked at them with a momentary curiosity, and went on with her work. They passed into the passage-way outside, which was full of smokers overflowing from the crowded room beyond, where the humbler frequenters of the inn ate and drank.

Kitty glanced round her in bewilderment. "The *salon de lecture* will be full, too. Where shall we go?" she said, looking up.

Ashe's hand clinched as it hung beside him. The old gesture — and the drawn, emaciated face — they pierced the heart.

"I told my servant to arrange me a sitting-room up-stairs," he said, hurriedly, in her ear. "Will you go up first?—number ten."

She nodded, and began slowly to mount the stairs, coughing as she went. The man whom Ashe had taken for a Genevese professor looked after her, glanced at his neighbor, and shrugged his shoulders. "Phthisique," he said, with a note of pity. The other nodded. "Et d'un type très avancé!"

They moved towards the door and stood looking into

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the night, which was dark with intermittent rain. Ashe studied a map of the commune which hung on the wall beside him, till at a moment when the passage had become comparatively clear he turned and went upstairs.

The door of his improvised *salon* was ajar. Beyond it his valet was coming out of his bedroom with wet clothes over his arm. Ashe hesitated. But the man had been with him through the greater part of his married life, and was a good heart. He beckoned him back into the room he was leaving, and the two stepped inside.

"Dell, my good fellow, I want your help. I have just met my wife here—Lady Kitty. You understand. Neither of us, of course, had any idea. Lady Kitty is very ill. We wish to have a conversation—uninterrupted. I trust you to keep guard."

The young man, son of one of the Haggart gardeners, started and flushed, then gave his master a look of sympathy.

"I'll do my best, sir."

Ashe nodded and went back to the next room. He closed the door behind him. Kitty, who was sitting by the fire, half rose. Their eyes met. Then with a stifled cry he flung himself down, kneeling beside her, and she sank into his arms. His tears fell on her face, anguish and pity overwhelmed him.

"You may!" she said, brokenly, putting up her hand to his cheek, and kissing him—"you may! I'm not mad or wicked now—and I'm dying!"

Agonized murmurs of love, pardon, self-abasement passed between them. It was as though a great stream

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bore them on its breast; an awful and majestic power enwrapped them, and made each word, each kiss, wonderful, sacramental. He drew himself away at last, holding her hair back from her brow and temples, studying her features, his own face convulsed.

"Where have you been? Why did you hide from me?"

"You forbade me," she said, stroking his hair. "And it was quite right. The dear Dean told me—and I quite understood. If I'd gone to Haggart then there'd have been more trouble. I should have tried to get my old place back. And now it's all over. You can give me all I want, because I can't live. It's only a question of months, perhaps weeks. Nobody could blame you, could they? People don't laugh when—it's death. It simplifies things so—doesn't it?"

She smiled, and nestled to him again.

"What do you mean?" he said, almost violently. "Why are you so ill?"

"It was Bosnia first, and then—being miserable—I suppose. And Poitiers was very cold—and the nuns very stuffy, bless them—they wouldn't let me have air enough."

He groaned aloud while he remembered his winter in London, in the forlorn luxury of the Park Lane house.

"Where have you been?" he repeated.

"Oh! I went to the Sœurs Blanches—you remember? —where I used to be. You went there, didn't you?"—he made a sign of miserable assent—"but I made them promise not to tell! There was an old mistress of novices there still who used to be very fond of me. She got one of the houses of the Sacré Cœur to take me in—at

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Poitiers. They thought they were gathering a stray sheep back into the fold, you understand, as I was brought up a Catholic—of sorts. And I didn't mind!" The familiar intonation, soft, complacent, humorous, rose like a ghost between them. "I used to like going to mass. But this Easter they wanted to make me 'go to my duties'—you know what it means?—and I wouldn't. I wanted to confess." She shuddered and drew his face down to hers again—"but only once—to—you—and then, well then, to die, and have done with it. You see, I knew one can't get on long with three-quarters of a lung. And they were rather tiresome—they didn't understand. So three weeks ago I drew some money out and said good-bye to them. Oh! they were very kind, and very sorry for me. They wanted me to take a maid, and I meant to. But the one they found wouldn't come with me when she saw how ill I was—and it all lingered on—so one day I just walked out to the railway-station and went to Paris. But Paris was rainy—and I felt I must see the sun again. So I stayed two nights at a little hotel maman used to go to—horrid place!—and each night I read your speeches in the reading-room—and then I got my things from Poitiers, and started—"

A fit of coughing stopped her, coughing so terrible and destructive that he almost rushed for help. But she restrained him. She made him understand that she wanted certain remedies from her own room across the corridor. He went for them. The door of this room had been shut by the observant Dell, who was watching the passage from his own bedroom farther on. When Ashe had opened it he found himself face to face as it

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were with the foaming stream outside. The window, as he had seen it before, was wide open to the water-fall just beyond it, and the temperature was piercingly cold and damp. The furniture was of the roughest, and a few of Kitty's clothes lay scattered about. As he fumbled for a light, there hovered before his eyes the remembrance of their room in Hill Street, strewn with chiffons and all the elegant and costly trifles that made the natural setting of its mistress.

He found the medicines and hurried back. She feebly gave him directions. "Now the strychnine!—and some brandy."

He did all he could. He drew some chairs together before the fire, and made a couch for her with pillows and rugs. She thanked him with smiles, and her eyes followed his every movement.

"Tell your man to get some milk! And listen"—she caught his hand. "Lock my door. That nice woman down-stairs will come to look after me, and she'll think I'm asleep."

It was done as she wished. Ashe took in the milk from Dell's hands, and a fresh supply of wood. Then he turned the key in his own door and came back to her. She was lying quiet, and seemed revived.

"How cosey!" she said, with a childish pleasure, looking round her at the bare white walls and scoured boards warmed with the fire-light. The bitter tears swam in Ashe's eyes. He fell into a chair on the other side of the fire, and stared—seeing nothing—at the burning logs.

"You needn't suppose that I don't get people to look after me!" she went on, smiling at him again, one shadowy hand propping her cheek. And she prattled on

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about the kindness of the chambermaids at Vevey and Brieg, and how one of them had wanted to come with her as her maid. "Oh! I shall find one at Florence if I get there—or a nurse. But just for these few days I wanted to be free! In the winter there were so many people about—so many eyes! I just pined to cheat them—get quit of them. A maid would have bothered me to stay in bed and see doctors—and you know, William, with this illness of mine you're so *restless!*"

"Where were you going to?" he said, without looking up.

"Oh! to Italy somewhere—just to see some flowers again—and the sun. Only not to Venice!"

There was a silence, which she broke by a sudden cry as she drew him down to her.

"William! you know—I was coming home to you, when that man—found me."

"I know. If it had only been I who killed him!"

"I'm just—*Kitty!*" she said, choking—"as bad as bad can be. But I couldn't have done what Mary Lyster did."

"Kitty—for God's sake!"

"Oh, I know it," she said, almost with triumph—"now I *know* it. I determined to know—and I got people in Venice to find out. She sent the message—that told him where I was—and I know the man who took it. I suppose it would be pathetic if I sent her word that I had forgiven her. But I *haven't!*"

Ashe cried out that it was wholly and utterly inconceivable.

"Oh no!—she hated me because I had robbed her of Geoffrey. I had killed her life, I suppose—she killed

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"HE DREW SOME CHAIRS TOGETHER BEFORE THE FIRE"

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mine. It was what I deserved, of course; only just at that moment— If there is a God, William, how could He have let it happen so?"

The tears choked her. He left his seat, and, kneeling beside her, he raised her in his arms, while she murmured broken and anguished confessions.

"I was so weak—and frightened. And *he* said, it was no good trying to go back to you. Everybody knew I had gone to Verona—and he had followed me— No one would ever believe— And he wouldn't go—wouldn't leave me. It would be mere cruelty and desertion, he said. My real life was—with him. And I seemed—paralyzed. Who *had* sent that message? It never occurred to me— I felt as if some demon held me—and I couldn't escape—"

And again the sighs and tears, which wrung his heart—with which his own mingled. He tried to comfort her; but what comfort could there be? They had been the victims of a crime as hideous as any murder; and yet—behind the crime—there stretched back into the past the preparations and antecedents by which they themselves, alack, had contributed to their own undoing. Had they not both trifled with the mysterious test of life—he no less than she? And out of the dark had come the axe-stroke that ends weakness, and crushes the unsteeled, inconstant will.

After long silence, she began to talk in a rambling, delirious way of her months in Bosnia. She spoke of the *cold*—of the high mountain loneliness—of the terrible sights she had seen—till he drew her, shuddering, closer into his arms. And yet there was that in her

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talk which amazed him; flashes of insight, of profound and passionate experience, which seemed to fashion her anew before his eyes. The hard peasant life, in contact with the soil and natural forces; the elemental facts of birth and motherhood, of daily toil and suffering; what it means to fight oppressors for freedom, and see your dearest—son, lover, wife, betrothed—die horribly amid the clash of arms; into this caldron of human fate had Kitty plunged her light soul; and in some ways Ashe scarcely knew her again.

She recurred often to the story of a youth, handsome and beardless, who had been wounded by a stray Turkish shot in the course of the long climb to the village where she nursed. He had managed to gain the height, and then, killed by the march as much as by the shot, he had sunk down to die on the ground-floor of the house where Kitty lived.

"He was a stranger—no one knew him in the village—no one cared. They had their own griefs. I dressed his wound—and gave him water. He thought I was his mother, and asked me to kiss him. I kissed him, William—and he smiled once—before the last hemorrhage. If you had seen the cold, dismal room—and his poor face!"

Ashe gathered her to his breast. And after a while she said, with closed eyes:

"Oh, what pain there is in the world, William!—what *pain!* That's what—I never knew."

The evening wore on. All the noises ceased downstairs. One by one the guests came up the stone stairs and along the creaking corridor. Boots were thrown

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out; the doors closed. The strokes of eleven o'clock rang out from the village campanile; and amid the quiet of the now drizzling rain the echoes of the bell lingered on the ear. Last of all a woman's step passed the door—stopped at the door of Kitty's room, as though some one listened, and then gently returned. "Fräulein Anna!" said Kitty—"she's a good soul."

Soon nothing was heard but the roar of the flooded stream on one side of the old narrow building and the dripping of rain on the other. Their low voices were amply covered by these sounds. The night lay before them, safe and undisturbed. Candles burned on the mantel-piece, and on a table behind Kitty's head was a paraffine lamp. She seemed to have a craving for light.

"Kitty!" said Ashe, suddenly bending over her—"understand! I shall never leave you again."

She started, her head fell back on his arm, and her brown eyes considered him:

"William! I saw the *Standard* at Geneva. Aren't you going home—because of politics?"

"A few telegrams will settle that. I shall take you to Geneva to-morrow. We shall get doctors there."

A little smile played about her mouth—a smile which did not seem to have any reference to his words or to her next question.

"Nobody thinks of the book now, do they, William?"

"No, Kitty, no! It's all forgotten, dear."

"Oh, it was abominable!" She drew a long breath. "But I can't help it—I did get a horrid pleasure out of writing it—till Venice—till you left off loving me. Oh, William! William!—what a good thing it is I'm dying!"

"Hush, Kitty—hush."

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"It gives one such an unfair advantage, though, doesn't it? You can't ever be angry with me again. There won't be time. William, dear!—I haven't had a brain like other people. I know it. It's only since I've been so ill—that I've been sane! It's a strange feeling—as though one had been *bled*—and some poison had drained away. But it would never do for me to take a turn and live! Oh no!—people like me are better safely under the grass. Oh, my beloved! my beloved! I just want to say that all the time, and nothing else—I've hungered so to say it!"

He answered her with all the anguish, all the passionate, fruitless tenderness and vain comfortings that rise from the human heart in such a strait. But when he asked her pardon for his hardness towards the Dean's petition, when he said that his conscience had tormented him thenceforward, she would scarcely hear a word.

"You did quite right," she said, peremptorily—"quite right."

Then she raised herself on her arm and looked at him.

"William!" she said, with a strange, kindled expression. "I—I don't think I can live any more! I think—I'm dying—here—now!"

She fell back on her pillows, and he sprang to his feet, crying that he must go for Fräulein Anna and a doctor. But she held him feebly, motioning towards the brandy and strychnine. "That's all—you can do."

He gave them to her, and again she revived and smiled at him.

"Don't be frightened. It was a sudden feeling—it came over me—that this dear little room—and your

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arms—would be the end. Oh, how much best! There! —that was foolish!—I'm better. It isn't only the lungs, you see; they say the heart's worst. I nearly went at Vevey, one night. It was such a long faint."

Then she lay quiet, with her hand in his, in a dreamy, peaceful state, and his panic subsided. Once she sent messages to Lady Tranmore—messages full of sorrow, touched also—by a word here, a look there—by the charm of the old Kitty.

"I don't deserve to die like this," she said, once, with a half-impatient gesture. "Nothing can prevent it's being beautiful—and touching—you know; our meeting like this—and your goodness to me. Oh, I'm glad! But I don't want to glorify—what I've done. *Shame! Shame!*"

And again her face contracted with the old habitual agony, only to be soothed away gradually by his tone and presence, the spending of his whole being in the broken words of love.

Towards the morning, when, as it seemed to him, she had been sleeping for a time, and he had been, if not sleeping, at least dreaming awake beside her, he heard a little, low laugh, and looked round. Her brown eyes were wide open, till they seemed to fill the small, blighted face; and they were fixed on an empty chair the other side of the fire.

"It's so strange—in this illness," she whispered—"that it makes one dream—and generally kind dreams. It's fever—but it's nice." She turned and looked at him. "Harry was there, William—sitting in that chair. Not a baby any more—but a little fellow—and so lively, and strong, and quick. I had you both—*both.*"

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Looking back afterwards, also, he remembered that she spoke several times of religious hopes and beliefs—especially of the hope in another life—and that they seemed to sustain her. Most keenly did he recollect the delicacy with which she had refrained from asking his opinion upon them, lest it should trouble him not to be able to uphold or agree with her; while, at the same time, she wished him to have the comfort of remembering that she had drawn strength and calm, in these last hours, from religious thoughts.

For they proved, indeed, to be the last hours. About three the morning began to dawn, clear and rosy, with rich lights striking on the snow. Suddenly Kitty sat up, disengaged herself from her wraps, and tottered to her feet.

"I'll go back to my room," she said, in bewilderment. "I'd rather."

And as she clung to him, with a startled yet half-considering look, she gazed round her, at the bright fire, the morning light, the chair from which he had risen—his face.

He tried to dissuade her. But she would go. Her aspect, however, was deathlike, and as he softly undid the doors, and half-helped, half-carried her across the passage, he said to her that he must go and waken Fräulein Anna and find a doctor.

"No—no." She grasped him with all her remaining strength; "stay with me."

They entered the little room, which seemed to be in a glory of light, for the sun striking across the low roof of the inn had caught the foamy water-fall beyond, and the

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reflection of it on the white walls and ceiling was dazzling.

Beside the bed she swayed and nearly fell.

"I won't undress," she murmured — "I'll just lie down."

She lay down with his help, turning her face to make a fond, hardly articulate sound, and press her cheek against his. In a few minutes it seemed to him that she was sleeping again. He softly went out of the room and down-stairs. There, early as it was, he found Fräulein Anna, who looked at him with amazement.

"Where can I find a doctor?" he asked her; and they talked for a few minutes, after which she went up-stairs beside him, trembling and flushed.

They found Kitty lying on her side, her face hidden entirely in the curls which had fallen across it, and one arm hanging. There was that in her aspect which made them both recoil. Then Ashe rushed to her with a cry, and as he passionately kissed her cold cheek he heard the clamor of the frightened girl behind him. "Ach, Gott!—Ach Gott!"—and the voices of others, men and women, who began to crowd into the narrow room.

THE END

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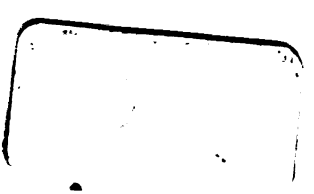

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